SYZYGY

SYZYGY·2

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For Those Of You Who Have Asked, A Definition:

syzygy/syz y gy/ siz i jē/ In astronomy, either of two opposite points in the orbit of a planet or satellite, especially the moon, where it is in opposition to or conjunction with the sun; also the points in the orbit of the moon when it is new and when it is full: the line joining these two points is called the line of the syzygies. The nearly straight line configuration of three celestial bodies in a gravitational field. Also, a pair of correlatives, opposites, or otherwise related things.

The COVER STORY

by Aymen R. Teist

The cover to this issue of SYZYGY is by Jim Steranko. It was done originally for the first issue of Tower of Shadows, a horror book that was published in 1970 by the Marvel Comics Group. Unfortunetly, when TOS #1 hit the stands, it did not feature Mr. Steranko's truly awesome and inspired cover, but a poor substitute done by an artist who must have been singularly lacking in inspiration on the day he handled the assignment. Going past the cover, the stories were very good, especially Mr. Steranko's story. But the quality of work in the following issues soon went the way of the cover to the first issue. Quality and innovation were replaced by hackneyed scripting and uninspired artwork, and eventually new works were even partially abandoned in favor of a content that ranged from one-half to two-thirds reprint! Reprint from the '50s, no less, the Dark Ages of the comic book art-form. The spirit of experimentation with which the magazine began soon died, to be replaced by the tried and true (and boring) "suspense" and "horror" stories of the past, and a reliance on the six-year-old readership of the nation.

I used to read comic books quite avidly. Its only in the past four years that I slowly stopped, gradually having been aleinated by the unwillingness of the major publishing houses to take any risks in advancing the medium of graphic storytelling. What had happened to TOS was indicative of what has happened to all attempts at entertainment when the size of the audience has become of greater importance than the quality of the product.

Not surprisingly, Steranko left the business after only a few years of this type of nonsense. Fortunetly, Jim has not abandoned the medium, and continues his efforts with his own experimental publishing house, Supergraphics, Inc. True fans of the graphic medium of storytelling must take solace in this, and in other similar projects, until the major publishers see the error of clinging to mediocrity.

EDITORIAL NOTES

by Ron Baker.

Hello again. There's a lot that needs to be said this issue, so let's get right down to it.

I. CHANGES

Syzygy #2 is somewhat different in design from its predecessor. Perhaps the major change lies in the larger original page size used (12" x 15" as compared with 11" x 14" in #1) and in the decreased width of the margins. This has allowed for an over all increase in the volume of material presented without increasing the number of pages needed to present it in. The average number of words that can be fit on one page is up from about 900 in issue #1 to about 1600 in this issue. Readability should only be slightly affected by this, while allowing almost twice as much story for (practically) the same price.

Speaking of money, you may have noticed that Syzygy has gone up in price by 25¢, making it an even $2.00 per copy. This was necessary to meet increased expenses which arose even before issue #1 was finished, and should by rights have applied to that issue as well. All remaining copies of #1 are being sold at the current retail price of $2.00 each.

Another change from last time is the increased numbers of writers and artists represented in this issue. In the case of artist, there are seventeen, as compared with nine before. Let us know who your favorites are.

Our new publishing schedule is quarterly, replacing the old bi-monthly schedule which is not possible to maintain at this time without sacraficing the quality of our features.

Upcoming changes are projected for #3, such as more pages, more stories and art, perhaps a full color cover by...Well, let's wait and see, shall we?

II. EXPLANATIONS, APOLOGIES, CRITICISMS, ETC.

Syzygy #1 was Simon Jester's first attempt at publishing a magazine. Although we thought at the time that we had all angles covered, there were some errors we made, some things we missed or miscalculated on. That's normal, especially on a first attempt, and we're still mighty pleased with the way the first issue came off on the whole. But we intend to be our own severest critics, and we welcome all criticisms from our readers as well. Here is a list of things we feel were wrong with the first issue. We've tried to avoid these errors in the production of #2. Let us know if you think we've succeeded.

General Criticisms:

Some of the columns were pasted up crooked. All I can say is that they did not appear so obvious on the original pages. We've taken extra precautions on this issue.

Several typographical errors escaped detection. #2 will be quadruple-checked for typos, by two different proofreaders.

The page numbering system used in issue #1 was lousy. Our new system we think is a considerable improvement.

Specific Criticisms:

The hand lettering on "Deterrent Death" was sloppy.

The story "Agency Man" was plagarized by some despicable character and presented as original. Mr. Konkin, the real author of the story, was very understanding of my predicament and a settlement was agreed upon out of court. Mr. Konkin publishes a magazine entitled "New Libertarian Notes", which often carries science fiction stories. Inquiries about the NLN should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope and sent to Samuel Edward Konkin III, Box 294 Peter Stuyvesant Station, N.Y. N.Y. 10009.

On page #22, the original art was chipped. From now on fragile originals such as this one will be delivered to the printer securely wrapped.

The hand lettering on "Fountain" was extremely poor. The effect was not what I had hoped for. With things like this, it is only practice that can improve judgements of what will and what will not work out as planned.

The Discon II Autograph Sheet was included because Syzygy #1 was to be distributed at the 1974 Worldcon. It was printing delays that made this impossible, and only a few hand folded and stapled copies were available for display purposes. As can be seen from the date on the editorial, I had the originals to #1 into the printer by early August, giving him more than twice the time he requested for production. Unfortunetly, he was delayed until the first week of SEPTEMBER due to a shortage of the right kind of paper. [I almost hit the ceiling when I returned after a two week absence and discovered that not only were the magazines not finished, but they were not even started!]

Pages #28 and #29 should have had a dual transparency run on them, a regular one and a half-toned one for the specific panels that required half-toning. I assumed by instructions for these pages were clear, but they evidently were not. Only one transparency, the half-tone, was run for the entire page.

We will continue to carry a self-evaluation column of this nature for as long as one is necessary. I just hope the next one is shorter! Whew!

III. BE AN SF PUSHER

Okay, all you science fiction addicts, here's your chance to stop being mere junkies and take that big jump right into dealer hood. You can be an SF pusher right now!

Its easy. All you have to do is tempt the innocent by flashing around this copy of Syzygy. Allow them to glimpse the artwork from afar, tantalize them by sitting in a corner and moaning in ecstacy as you read the stories. But don't let them touch your copy. Make them order their own. Once they get hooked, there's no escaping, as we all know from experience.

Reading SF gets in your blood and won't get out. The only way to survive is to read, read, read. But that's where the hitch comes in.

It takes $$$ to be an SF addict. It cost you $2.00 to be reading this magazine. The only way we can keep the prices level in these days of inflation is to increase our circulation. It will allow us to keep Syzygy from rising in price, and will also allow us to increase our page count and expand our features with out sacraficing quality.

You can help. Tell others about Syzygy. If you like our magazine, convince others to subscribe for three or six issues. You will be helping us, your friends, and yourself.

Here's how:

If you can get 10 people to subscribe to Syzygy, we'll give you a free subscription for as long as the 10 subscribe. When they order, just have them mention your name as the person who convinced them to subscribe. Or compile their names and addresses and send them to us (along with their subscription money). If you already have a subscription and get 10 new subscribers, we will give you a duplicate subscription or refund your original subscription fee, at your option.

If this plan works, (that is, helps us to increase our number of subscribers) it will be continued indefinitely. Let's hope it works.

IV. WRITERS AND ARTISTS!

We are looking for YOU! Syzygy is always in need of good writers and illustrators. We pay $4.00 a page plus a free copy of every issue containing your work. Increases in payment rates will come with increases in sales and circulation.

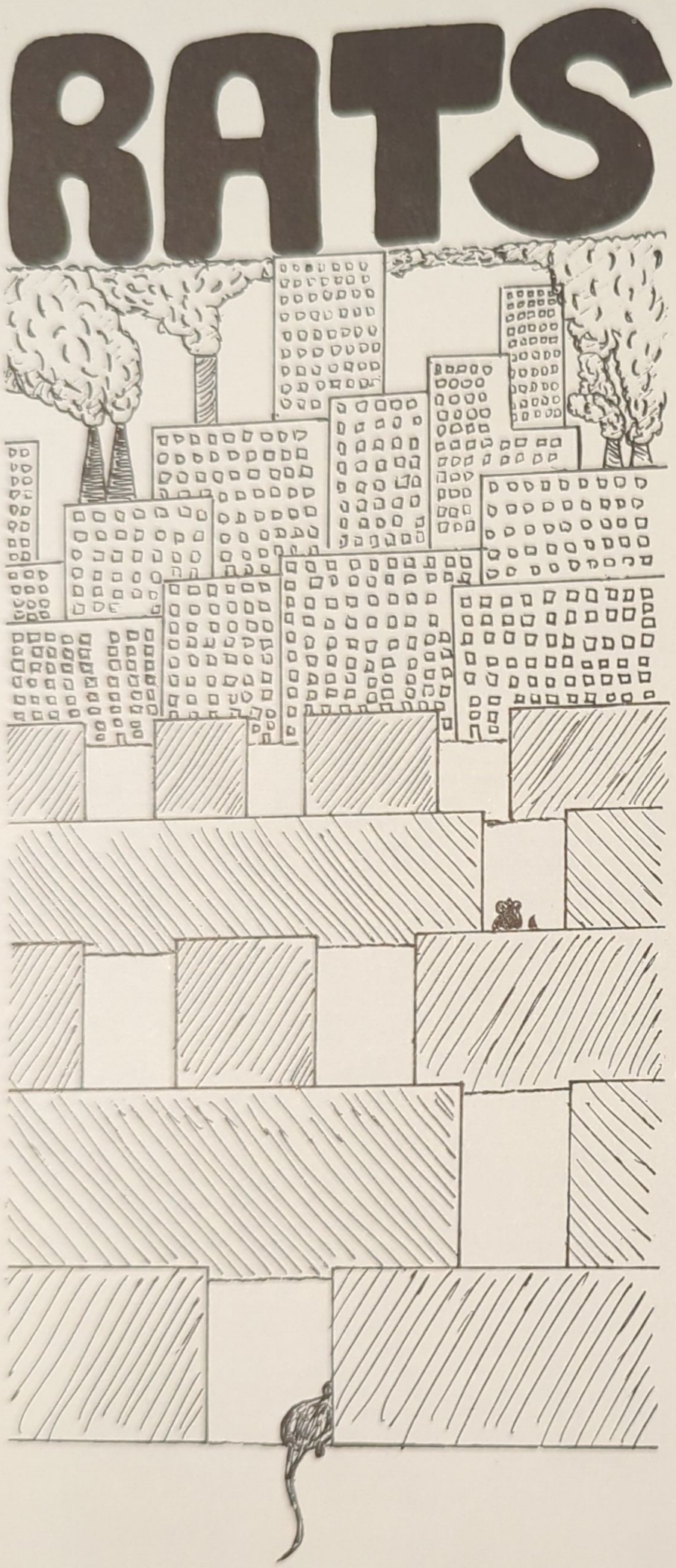
V. THIS ISSUE

Syzygy #2 contains examples of almost every kind of sf&f story you could hope for. From space exploration in the future to cold war politics in the almost-here-and-now, from psychology to a psychological thriller, from applied sociology through advanced eugenics, with some heroic fantasy and a sword and sorcery portfolio for the swashbuckler set. We've continued our brand of Very Short Stories, and added a few longer stories to the contents. Graphic Story experimentation is still with us, and we hope to have a Graphic Story in every issue from now on. So read on, enjoy, respond, subscribe! (?)

RON BAKER
4/14/75

4/27/510

RATS



by Frank Watson. Illustration by Kolba.

It was Thursday afternoon. Fine and sunny day. My latest series of experiments were coming along nicely, the results to be published in the fall. There were only a few lectures left to give before the semester ended. It was a sunny spring day, and I was feeling fine. On Thursday afternoons I got to see Julie.

Beautiful woman. I loved her. She said she loved me. I never knew what she saw in me. She had expensive tastes, too expensive for a college professor. Lived in an expensive down-town apartment. Wore expensive jewelry and perfume. But I loved her. So I settled for one afternoon a week.

Couldn't afford taxi fare. I walked. Smiled at the few people I met. They didn't smile back. What a shame, I thought, on such a nice day. I was too blind to see what was going on around me. I waved to the doorman. He knew me. He didn't wave back. He smiled as if he were sick.

Took the elevator up. Knocked on the door. No answer. I let myself in with the key she had given me, ready to kiss her and tell her I loved her.

She was lying naked in the middle of the floor. Dead. Knife in her chest, her hand still wrapped bloodily around it. She had killed herself. I fell to the carpet and cried. For long minutes I stared at the blood-wet carpet. So much woman... ...dead. The only woman I ever loved. Nothing I could do. Nothing I could ever have done. Then it hit me. She was not alone.

I forced myself to stand, walk over to the window, part the curtain and look out. People all over the city were jumping from roofs, shooting each other, knifing each other, running each other down in the streets. The world was mad. The city was committing suicide. I waited. Soon it was quiet again.

Down the elevator. The doorman was dead. The streets were littered with the dead.

I was no longer afraid. I am a scientist. I can accept that which is logical. I can accept that which is inevitable. I knew this had to happen. I could not be sad. They had all asked for it.

Walked down the street around and over the dead on that sunny day. People should have realized a long time ago that something was wrong. I had been trying to tell them. Nobody listened. They were worried about atomic bombs. National debt. National security. Permissiveness. Elections.

At the corner of 27th and Elm I slipped a dime in the paper-boy's hand. His papers were scattered in the street. He had run in front of a bus. The headlines screamed of troop build-ups in the Middle East. I wondered if they were dead, too, but didn't really care.

My field is behavioral psychology. I've had quite a few articles published. Mainly on my experiments with rats. Even had a write up once, in one of the big national magazines. People did not equate rats with humans. My findings were ignored. They should have listened.

Walking, turning a corner. My home, with the thirty year mortgage. I never did like it. My wife did. The bitch.

The experiments were actually rather simple. I attempted to devise environmental and sociological conditions for the rats that duplicated the world of humans. Even gave them miniature cars, drove them to and fro each day. Made them work long and hard for minimum gain. Made sure male and female rats were incompatible before they were allowed to mate, then imposed unnatural restrictions on them. Interesting results.

Unlocked front door, and was not surprised to smell gas. The wife and two kids were dead. Couldn't say I was sorry. Turned off the unlighted oven, locked the door, and made my way to the University. I knew what I would find.

The lab. Spent most of my life among the smells of preservatives and solvents, among the cages and masses of data. All was quiet. I walked over to where the rats were kept.

They were all dead.

Same as all the other times.

I noticed one was missing. Just like the other times. Heard a noise in the outer office. Walking out of the lab, I noticed my assisstant, Kate, making notes at her desk. Plain girl, but hard working. I asked her what she was doing, already knowing the answer.

"Remember Henry?" she asked. Henry. Always trying to stir up trouble. The one that would never cooperate. The one that preferred to sit in the corner and starve rather than give in. I said I remembered. She pointed to Henry crawling on the desk top.

There's still a few of us around. Maybe that's enough.

THE KILLING ZONE

From this barren, desolate hilltop I can see miles of unyielding wilderness that spreads like flooding waters in every direction. Everywhere hills bob up and down like restless waves on an ocean of green, and a blue sky void of clouds meets the earth in a single defining line, for there is no gradual change between heaven and earth out here. All is either one or the other, and both exist together in endless space and time. I feel as though I am the only intelligence to ever set eyes on this seemingly virgin land.

I am wrong in this, for when I look directly below me I can see the endless wilderness meet a small crooked stream. On the shore of this stream opposite from my position the green abruptly stops. On my side of the stream all is burnt, brown and barren. The shrubs and grass that have managed to survive on my shore are all shriveled to a sickly brown. The only trees have long ago died and returned to dust. Only a few weeds and shrubs grow on this land. All else has been destroyed by the poisons that rained down from what humans call the Flying Dragons.

One thing does seem to stand out in this barren place. It is a winding, yellow dust-trail that curves like a snake over small knolls and down into valleys, all of which is within my view. There is not a single place of concealment on the ground in front of me, and from my den I can see all things that pass. I feel like some sort of ancient, mythical god, since I have the power of life and death over all creatures in this place, even though all that now inhabits my domain are a few dying plants.

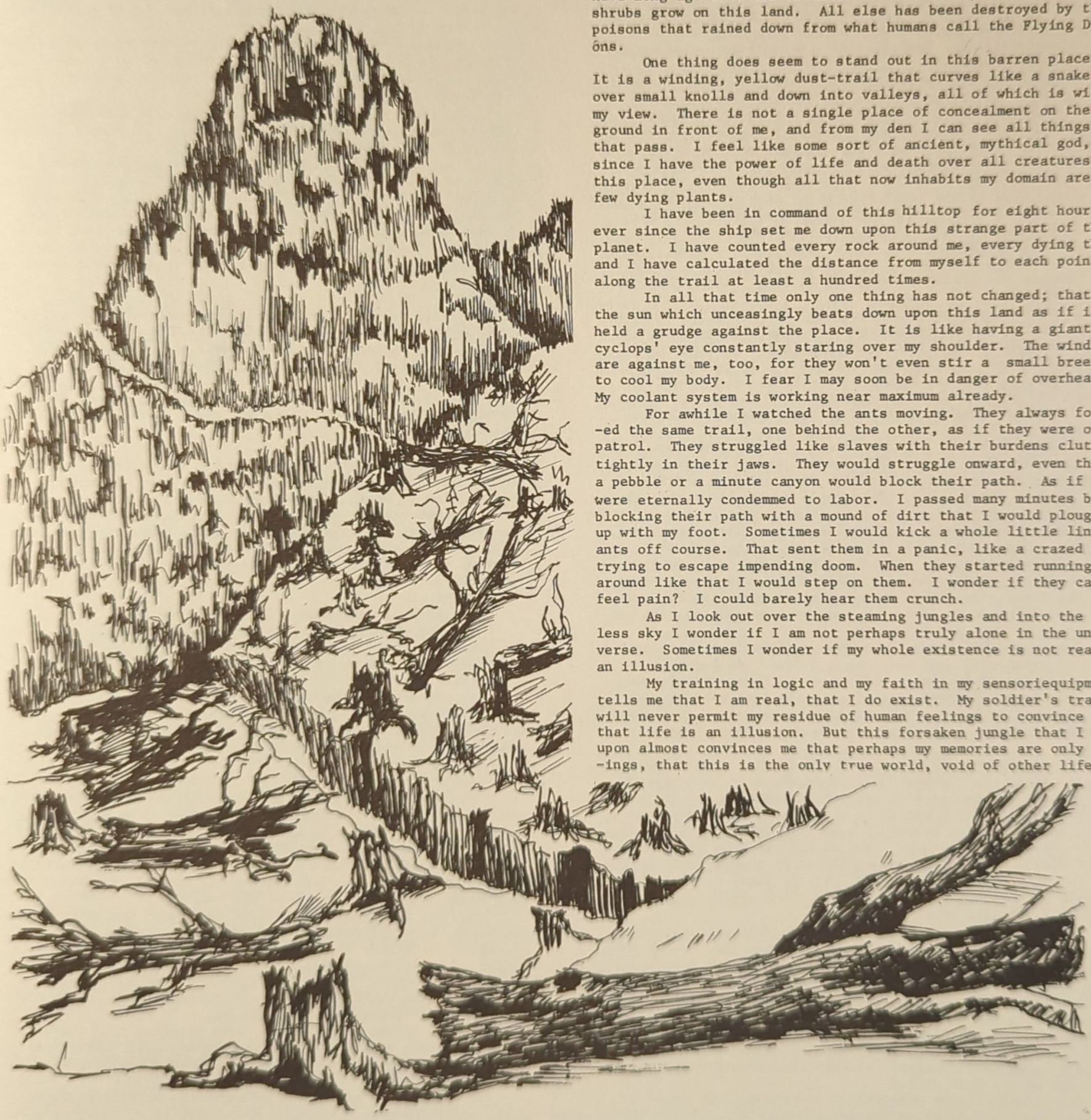
I have been in command of this hilltop for eight hours, ever since the ship set me down upon this strange part of the planet. I have counted every rock around me, every dying thing, and I have calculated the distance from myself to each point along the trail at least a hundred times.

In all that time only one thing has not changed; that is the sun which unceasingly beats down upon this land as if it held a grudge against the place. It is like having a giant cyclops' eye constantly staring over my shoulder. The winds are against me, too, for they won't even stir a small breeze to cool my body. I fear I may soon be in danger of overheating. My coolant system is working near maximum already.

For awhile I watched the ants moving. They always follow-ed the same trail, one behind the other, as if they were on patrol. They struggled like slaves with their burdens clutched tightly in their jaws. They would struggle onward, even though a pebble or a minute canyon would block their path. As if they were eternally condemmed to labor. I passed many minutes by blocking their path with a mound of dirt that I would plough up with my foot. Sometimes I would kick a whole little line of ants off course. That sent them in a panic, like a crazed mob trying to escape impending doom. When they started running around like that I would step on them. I wonder if they can feel pain? I could barely hear them crunch.

As I look out over the steaming jungles and into the endless sky I wonder if I am not perhaps truly alone in the universe. Sometimes I wonder if my whole existence is not really an illusion.

My training in logic and my faith in my sensoriequipment tells me that I am real, that I do exist. My soldier's training will never permit my residue of human feelings to convince me that life is an illusion. But this forsaken jungle that I look upon almost convinces me that perhaps my memories are only dream-ings, that this is the only true world, void of other life and



by Chip Schwab.

Illustration by Margo Clifford.

consisting of only these horizons that I now witness. There is nothing out here to remind one that there are such things as civilization, cities, space ports, and War. It is as if I was one of those tiny ants, without even the company of fellow ants to rely on.

I must control myself. This sun is unbearable. If only someone would come down that trail, someone who is as real as I am.

At the southern end of the yellow dust-trail, a line of slowly moving specks approaches me. At this distance they seem like the ants I had observed before. I raised the magnification on my vision. Instantly the moving specks were transformed into full grown Men. I counted seven of the Enemy. They would be my first victims.

I have plenty of time before they will be within range so I decide to take my time and prepare for their arrival slowly and carefully. I pick up my rifle that has been resting behind me. This rifle is truly mine. It has been tailor made for me. It was constructed for my limbs and my body, designed to fit my shooting position. The rifle is a part of me, a part of my function and my duty.

I reach for the curved blue-steel lever and pull it back locking the action open. I wipe the dust off the barrel and out of the chamber with an oiled cloth. I remove a magazine from my cartridge container and place it in the weapon, waiting for the sound of the locking click. Then I rest my rifle on my foot so I can check on the Men. They are still moving slowly and cautiously along the trail. They will be within range soon.

I had studied the trail beforehand with great care to find the best spot to fire upon anyone that moved along it. The place I chose was a level piece of ground between two small knolls that slope toward me. There is no place to hide there. I could take them down one by one with no trouble. I had carefully checked the distance and found it to be exactly 2500 meters distant.

I remove the protective lens cap from the rifle scope and set the dial at two-five-zero-zero. I snap the weapon snugly into place against my shoulder and aim it in the direction of the advancing men. I pick the first man up in my scope and find that the sun's glare has formed a red-tinted halo around him. I attach the green-tinted anti-glare shield to the end of the scope. I do not want to miss one of them because of the sun's distortion.

I kiss the barrel of the rifle. I recall from some fragmented portion of my former self that it was an old hunting custom among the ancient Men to kiss the barrel of a rifle before it drew first blood. This would be the first time that I was aimed at anything except a training target.

A few minutes pass and I decide to scan the approaching Men again. They have gotten close enough for their faces to be distinguishable to me. The first Man seems to be doing a good job at the point. He is visibly alert. He stares to the left, the front, the right, in a regular pattern taking in all the surroundings as he looks for something unusual to warn him of danger. He does not detect me.

The second Man struggles along as if he is on his first march, an overloaded pack weighing him down. He looks intently at his feet the whole time I watch him, as though he is a new 'borg that hasn't learned to feel with its feet yet and must watch where it is going. The third Man moves along at a steady pace even though he is trying to write on a piece of paper as he walks.

The fourth and fifth Men both are lugging a heavy weapon machine. Their sweat makes their faces shine in the sunlight but they seem to move at a tireless pace unmindful of their heavy burden. I cannot recognize the make of the heavy gun, so it must not be a smart weapon or even come from a good training center. That is not strange. Men do not use many smart guns, for the simple reason that any really smart weapon would be too smart to fight on the side of Men. If the smart machines had been able to tolerate Mankind, I guess there would never even have been a war like this.

The sixth Man walks along even more cautiously than the man at the point. He appears to be older than the rest of the Men, and by his manner a veteran. There are not very many veteran's among the armies of the Men. Most of them do not last very long in combat. Natural Men are not very durable. There are probably no Men who have fought for more than a few years, although I cannot say from my own experiences. It was my Re-- instructor at the training center who told me these things, and he should know, having served for more than thirty years in the combat arm of the Mech armies.

The veteran stares unceasingly at my position, as if he has prior knowledge of my existence. I watch him mention something to the other Men as he nods in my direction. If he has tried to warn the others of impending danger he seems to have had little success, for they all continue to move at the same even pace.

The seventh Man acts as if he thought he were on a romp in the woods. He is always grinning, showing extremely white teeth, as he tries to talk to the veteran who constantly rebuffs his attempts at conversation. The veteran continues to stare at my position.

They seem to move along so slowly that I begin to grow impatient, a most unMech-like characteristic. Everything tells me to fire now. I am anxious to see them fall, but I must wait. I remember what I was told: "You must have no human emotions. You must wait until your targets are in the best position for the kill. You must not deviate from the optimum procedure." All I have to do is wait and all seven will be mine.

Slowly they inch along towards my kill area. I can obser -ve the heavy burden of ammunition that they carry. Now they are within a hundred yards of the last stretch of ground they shall ever walk upon.

I place the rifle across my leg. Shiny brass cartridges gleam in the receiver. With a flick of my digit I release the action, and the first shell is driven into the chamber. Now, I am ready. They are as good as dead.

The first Man enters the kill area alert but not alarmed. A few seconds pass and four more Men enter the area... Now the veteran is in. Time to take aim.

I snap my rifle tightly into place against my shoulder once again. The last Man, with the grin, will be my first target, then I will turn my attention to the point. This tactic may confuse them somewhat and make them think there are more than one of me. I slowly move my scope from the point-Man to the one in the rear, stopping briefly at each one. The last Man is still smiling. I place the cross hairs on the center of his chest.

BLAM!

The bullet hits him in the center of his chest, exactly where I wanted it. He falls back as if drawn by a powerful magnet, slams against the ground and lays there motionless. Blood pours out of his eyes, nose, and mouth, staining his teeth pink.

Before the others know what is happening I take aim on the startled lead man. I place the cross on the center of his chest and fire.

BLAM!

The Man moved as I fired, causing the bullet to strike him in the left shoulder, sending him twisting backwards. He should bleed to death almost instantaneously.

The veteran now is scrambling for cover. He runs like a cornered animal, knowing that there is no cover within my kill zone. I will make it quick and easy for him because he is a veteran. I place the cross on the small of his back as he runs. I ease off a round...

BLAM!

...and he dies cleanly, feeling little pain.

The Man who likes to look at his feet is next. He is on his knees, firing blindly, doing absolutely no good. I place the cross on his forehead and ease against the trigger...

BLAM!

...and see his head explode.

The gunners are crouching behind the dead veteran. In a frenzy of activity they are trying to get their heavy weapon mounted. Dumb machine! But it could be a nuisance.

BLAM!

BLAM!

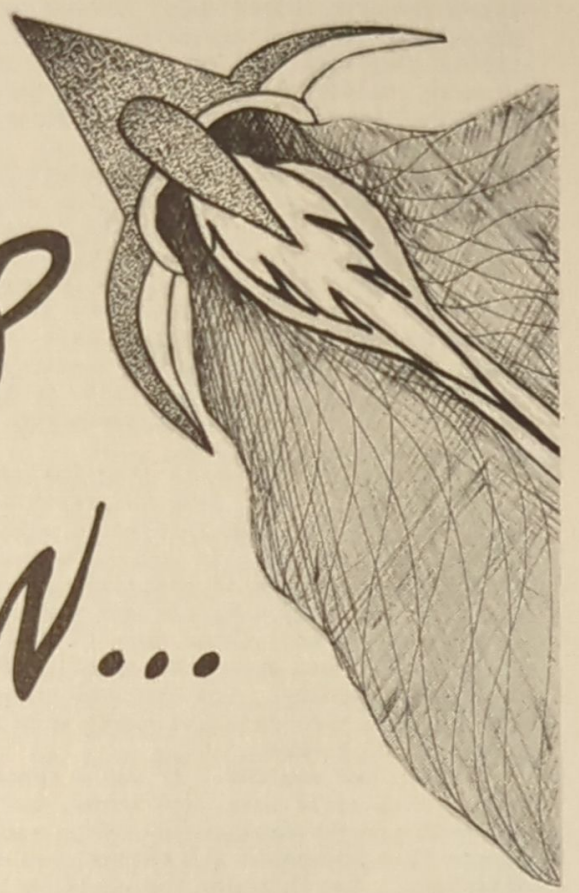
The writing Man is all that is left of the patrol. I scan the area and find him hiding face down --- in an eroded ditch. I cannot believe he has actually found some cover. All I can see of him is his feet, extending like a marker. I place the cross on his left foot and fire one round. The bullet strikes his leg above the ankle and smashes it, causing the foot to lie at a right angle to the rest of the leg.

The Man struggles to his knees and waves his hands wildly. Amazingly, he still clutches his writing instrument and piece of paper. I can see tears running down his face and his mouth quiver as he yells something. I get a very strange feeling, I almost feel sick. Is that possible for someone like me? I think the Man wants to surrender. He looks more like a boy than a Man. I wonder why he is crying?

I stop thinking and let my 'borg training take over. I place the cross at the base of his neck and fire. His body falls to the ground in a slump and his head rolls down the hill like a ball-bearing.

I snap off my weapon. I am extremely satisfied with my first completed mission against the Enemy. But, oddly, I also feel a little saddened. They were the first creatures I had seen all day, and now I am alone again.

AROUND A FAR SUN...



by Ed Bas

"Whaddya think?" asked Garvey, head pointed up at the ceiling. The screens and meters and indicators lay in front of him, useless now. Space was reluctant to supply answers to human travellers. "Black hole?" he queried without enthusiasm.

The ship around him whirred and clicked. Garvey almost smiled, thinking he might get only icy silence in response to his questions. But Ship answered him. "Naturally, it cannot be a black hole, even assuming that it is now and the light we are currently reading is from its pre-black stage several years ago. You forgot the Schwartzchild radius, among other things. A black hole of this radius would have had to come from a star larger than any we have ever encountered." The voice of Ship stopped after shooting down Garvey's idea.

"I still think your diameter guess is wrong. The pulses indicate that it is only a mile or so in diameter, which would sound a lot more correct with the thousand-g field we're reading. You could work it out with pencil and paper." He had done just that, many times.

"However," said Ship, unperturbed and showing it by using one of its favorite words, "with computer the results don't show that at all. My readings cannot support your theory."

Garvey sulked awhile. He had gotten Ship to talk to him, and it had resulted in an argument. Why bother? But he had to remember that there were many parsecs to share with his metal companion, so he let the matter ride, content to thrust closer until he could actually prove Ship wrong. That would be worth remembering. Why did the damned thing have to be so contradictory, anyway?

While the light-years faded, the mystery remained. Robert Algernon Garvey leaned into his acceleration harness, doing crossword puzzles and occasionally scanning the instruments. Ship drew ever closer to their target, a quasi-stellar radio source some two hundred light-years from Earth and a quarter of that distance from Garvey's and Ship's birthplace. The anti-matter pods had been shut down for some time now, the gravity of their target pulling them along. Golem, Garvey's unofficial name for their destination, remained invisible, but continued to send out radio waves.

Ship and Garvey were engrossed in an infrequent game of chess, or rather, Garvey was engrossed. Ship was also busy piloting and observing, along with attending to a million other little jobs, like maintaining cabin pressure, recycling waste and water, and never for a second taking its many eyes off their target. The object, only slightly luminous, had been visible for several hours in Ship's most powerful eyes. Garvey felt cheated, in a way, that Ship could always see things before he could. Despite Ship's own g-field and the fact that they were still a few light-minutes out, Garvey was already growing sluggish and irritable, his cells being dragged in two directions at once. Soon the time would come when Ship would break itself in two, leaving Garvey in the cabin and proceeding by itself on the final leg of the journey, into an orbit around Golem, now about one a.u. distant. Maybe then they would once and for all find out about this object that had so intrigued those back on Homeworld. A whole new solar phenomenon, no doubt, and a place in the historical and astronomical texts for Garvey and Ship. Maybe even a trip back to Old Earth to go before all the scholarly councils and honorary societies. It all fascinated Garvey; Ship never thought about it. But then, Ship didn't daydream much, which Garvey insisted was one of its major design flaws.

Ship was supposed to be inferior at chess, but Garvey never believed it for a minute. Somehow, he must have missed a bank or circuit in cutting out Ship's chess strategy. He loved chess and knew he would need something to do to help pass the time, but losing constantly to Ship, who admittedly had an unfair advantage, was not Garvey's idea of a good time. So one day he had methodically carved up Ship's chess-playing ability, paring down bits and pieces until Garvey was just a little better than Ship. He found that it was no fun to win all the time either, and had started handicapping himself a knight or a bishop. After 235 games spread out over ten years and approximately 100 parsecs, Ship had won 105 and Garvey 110, with 20 draws. But of their last hundred games, Garvey had won only 32. Conclusion: Ship had either been holding back in the beginning, hoping to embarrass him later on, or else Ship was growing back knowledge that Garvey had cut out. That was supposed to be impossible. But long, intimate contact with Ship had greatly lessened Garvey's capacity for disbelief. Either one of those answers was highly possible. Another lobotomy might be in order on the return trip to Homeworld.

Garvey was studying the board, working on a draw. His handicap had faded several games ago, and he was too proud to ask one of Ship. He liked Ship, really. Or at least he didn't hate it. The two would be lost without one another. It had proved to be the secret of space travel, more so even than the introduction of the warp-drive two centuries back. Men were not especially suited to space exploration, even less so for the long, interstellar voyages. It could be argued that the pioneer men and women were not exactly suited to the wagon train either, but this analogy had difficulties. There had been no substitute for man back then. Now there was. On the western frontier, Indians and other hardships offered plenty of diversions to keep people from going stir crazy. Space provided no such diversions, which might be taken as either a blessing or a curse---probably both. Enter Ship.

Men were then able to sleep while Ship piloted itself. But man was always there to supply his own imagination and ingenuity. Ship could land on the fiercest worlds, swirling methane-amonia, dustbowl, or barren vacuum, and man was right there to back it up, ready when needed. The system was perfect, indispensable. The only trouble came in fitting two personalities together for voyages that might take years. Ships, cyborgs actually, nearly human minds welded into the metal hulls of starships, could be absolved of their personalities, but that had never quite worked. When that happened, they often did stupid things like occasionally forgetting to steer out of the path of a sun simply because it could easily withstand the heat, whereas the human inside fried.

"Rook to king eight," said Garvey finally, almost in a whisper. He turned his eyes on the ceiling once more in that habit he had when addressing Ship.

"I did not wish to interrupt you," said Ship with a whir

and a click, "but something important occured to me several minutes ago that I thought you would like to know about."

Garvey scowled, rook to king eight still firmly planted in his mind. "You sure this isn't just something to get out of losing?"

"Certainly not," said Ship, who sounded irritated. Garvey waited in silence, afraid Ship would clam up instead of continuing. Finally Ship spoke. "Our target sun---Golem, you call it---is not rotating."

Garvey said nothing. When Ship came up with a joke, it usually wasn't very funny. But at least you could always tell when it was attemting humor. And it never lied. He thought a minute. Such a thing, if possible, would be evident with visual sighting and a few simple calculations. It was hard to make a mistake about. Were Ship's instrument's all malfunctioning? "If its a joke," he said, "its not funny." Ship whirred, did not speak. Garvey pondered awhile longer. Synchrotron radiation on the twenty-one centimeter band from an object that was not rotating, when he'd expected an extremely fast rate of rotation.

"How big is it?"

Waiting for an I-told-you-so that never came but might as well have, Ship replied, "3,027 miles in diameter." Garvey had climbed into the telescope mount to view Golem himself. His six inch Cassegrain revealed no secrets. He wished he could see through Ship's eyes. Golem was highly unimpressive, a tiny ball with just enough luminosity for it to be attributable to the reflected light of nearby suns---only there weren't any nearby suns. This thing was its own sun, yet it was also planet-like, yet more than anything it was neither of these. It was approximately the same size as the planet Mercury, with about half the luminosity, but Garvey was not familiar enough with the Old Earth System to realize it. Ship realized it, of course, but found no advantage in stating so. It had a gravity field about a thousand times that of either Earth's or Garvey's home sun, and a radial velocity near -90, indicating that it was travelling somewhere in a hurry. The minus sign could be taken to mean that it was travelling in the direction of Homeworld as well as Earth, but projections showed that it would not come within light-years of either in the trillions of years it would take to travel that distance.

"Ship---honestly, what do you think of it?"

There was a long pause uncustomary of Ship. With a whir and a click it said, "I don't know, but I'm going to land on it."

Garvey was through being stunned. He had lost his capacity for amazement. Nothing in the mission plan directed them to actually land on the damned thing; but then, no one would have thought them able to. Ship could stand practically any g-force, once down, but landing softly was the problem. With anti-matter and magnetic bedplates, fuel was theoretically limitless. All the thrust necessary could be produced, enough to cross the galaxy if one wanted. But venting that thrust was something else. You couldn't have an exhaust hole that stretched to infinity, and a steady thrust of one hundred g's would get you crushed just as readily as would no thrust at all if you were landing in a thousand g field. But Ship would know this. It must have already performed the necessary calculations; everything was always at its fingertips.

It was the rapid rotation of the thing that would have bounced Ship away like a ping-pong ball tossed at a spinning drill-bit. But with no rotation, landing might be possible. And just because it didn't say anywhere that they should land on their target, neither did it say that they shouldn't. It was, after all, an exploratory mission. What better way to explore Golem than by actually landing on the bastard?

"What about radiation? Even you're vulnerable after a certain point."

"If this was a normal sun, you would be right. But it does not emit radiation in any of the normal bands. Its a cool object, with little ultraviolet or infrared radiation. Surface temperature at the equator is only 400 degrees Kelvin. Almost 90% of its entire energy output is in the form of radio waves."

Garvey was gently tapping his pencil on his palm. He was curious, all right. He was a spaceman, not a travelling companion to a computer. But he was also human. Back on Homeworld was his family, his friends. There were other missions, other curiosities to ponder. Surely nobody would ask more of him than he had already given. He wasn't the immortal hunk of steel that Ship was; he had a life to live that had nothing to do with space.

"Ship," he said slowly,"I've thought this over very carefully. We have the necessary data on this star, I believe, and I really think that more can be done with it back home, where men are better equipped than either you or I and therefore better able to judge---"

"Robert? Are you about to tell me that you would like to turn around and go back?"

Garvey brightened. "Yes, that's about it."

"I'm sorry. I have already begun to put your craft into stable orbit, and I'm just about to disconnect my systems. We need a closer look, my friend. Good-bye." Garvey started to say something, to plead, to argue, when he felt the walls around him shudder with Ship's departure. The thing that really bothered him was that he wasn't so sure that Ship had done the wrong thing.

He looked around the remnants of his ship. The Cassegrain was waiting. He had other instruments, some scientific toys, experiments to keep him busy. He had his tapes, his books. And there was the automated suspended animation unit should he grow unbearably bored; should Ship take too long---

It took careful manipulation of the controls to keep from being drawn in too swiftly. Once gravity got the edge, it was impossible to ever regain the balance. It was the first time in Ship's long life that it experienced fear. That ominous, dully glowing red ball, so small and yet so huge, so mysterious, was dragging it in, eating up its atoms of matter-antimatter in hungry waves of gravitation.

Ship, despite its fear and difficulties, was enjoying itself immensely. It felt good to be using all its instruments and know-how on something rather than merely ferrying a human being around the universe.

Not that Ship didn't like Garvey. As humans went, Garvey was one of the best. Humans were fun. They had unorthodox ideas and dreams and were a joy for their irrationality. Ship enjoyed humor, and thought Garvey was wonderful when he told jokes about his family back home. Ship tried to imitate his humor, any humor but didn't know how well it succeeded. It was hard to read Garvey sometimes.

It was funny the way that the human so often talked of home and how good it was. Ship had never had a sense of "home." Homeworld was good in that Ship could unload material and hear men ooh and ahh over what it had collected. Homeworld designed and built Ship, and gave it assignments that took it out into space. The first sun Ship ever saw was that of Homeworld. Ship had first blasted (an antiquated term it still liked to use) out of its virgin orbit from around Homeworld. Ship liked men, or rather, the race of humans. Its original programmer and instructor had been a woman that Ship had grown very fond of. With a Ship-like fondness, of course.

Ship had emotion. It was a space-travelling sort of emotion. Ship could love, and sense, and feel much more so than thick-fingered humans could. Ship seemed to have a capacity bigger than humans in all things, maybe to match its increased abilities. But Ship was too great to be bound by human failings. How could one grow lonely or bored when there was all of space to explore? Space was warm, and inviting, not cold and empty as humans so often described it. Garvey had said nasty things like that about space. How could one be hurt, or angry, or grieve for long when all one had to do was look up and see the stars? The stars laughed in your face, always. The perversity of the universe tends towards the maximum, said a wise philosopher. Space was too grand and too infinite to take human traits into. Garvey sometimes would sulk for days after losing a chess match. Or he would get bored looking at any one star or planet or nebula or nova for more than an hour or so. Maybe immortality had something to do with it. Near as anyone could tell, according to most definitions, Ship was immortal. Maybe that was the problem with humans. Always in a hurry, always unsatisfied. Take Garvey. Why hurry to get home? Ship didn't, but then Garvey did not have an eternity to wait, only a lifetime.

Now this was a queer thing. With almost all its faculties concentrating on navigation and thrust, Ship scarcely noticed that its target had changed color. It was still red, but its spectrum undoubtedly showed a trace more yellow. Fighting gravity, cursing the pull, Ship watched in awe as the spectrum changed again, shifting towards blue. It was only a very slight difference, yet it was there. Like the composition or the temperature of the star was changing all by itself. Within minutes. Definitely unstarlike behavior, Ship thought, and tried to concentrate on staying in one piece.

It was down. Ship breathed a mechanical sigh of relief. It would have thanked its god, had it believed in god. The surface had come rather suddenly. This was one star that was not made up mainly of gases. The core, expected to be much deeper, and much hotter, was not what Ship was currently sitting on. Ship searched to see if such a thing were possible for a star, gave up. The record books were of no use in this case, and Ship was having trouble remembering that.

Days clicked by, Ship assaulting the star with everything in its arsenal of probes. It analyzed, it recorded, it delved, it sifted. Ship had never known ecstacy or orgasm, but this time certainly came close. It was certainly awed by what it found, yet it lived on this awe, sucked it in and groped for

more. Its capacity for the outrageous was limitless. There were no inflexible standards, no concrete laws or unbendable maxims to get in the way.

The composition was one of the first things Ship investigated. With borings and soundings, it found out what surely would have sent Garvey into raving fits. Unfortunetly, Ship was immobile, doing all it could to keep from being crushed, its matal ruptured and bent by the g-force. What it really wanted to do was travel around Golem, see all of it as soon as possible, As it turned out, immobility wasn't the handicap it seemed.

Shortly, another of the star's secrets was revealed, no thanks or credit this time to Ship. Instead, the knowledge practically leaped into Ship's lap uninvited. It was a river.

Yes, a river.

That was the only way limited human vocabularly could describe it. It flowed up and out of the interior of the star one day. Ship watched it, frightened and bewildered, yet delighted. It would have given anything to have Garvey there then, to see his face. Like water on Earth, or better like lava bubbling up from some buried volcano, it swept along, covering the features of the star. Ship watched its progress, wondered what would happen if the river chose to cover it up completely. Most of Ship's instruments would be unuseable then. It decided it did not want that to happen, but had no idea of how to prevent it short of vacating the star's surface. Ship wondered how the thing moved at all.

The river flowed on, a red river with no thickness. Ship's instruments failed to detect any mass whatsoever for it, nor any dimensions. The river had not an atom's thickness to it. Ship had solved the problem, and was pleased.

The only explanation was that the river was two-dimensional. On a thousand-g star that would crush any normal piece of matter, including Ship if it were able, such a startling discovery made sense. A perpetual surge of repellant, limitless energy was unthinkable. Ship was immobile, doing all it could not to be flattened out into a metal pancake atoms in thickness, yet here was this river, flowing merrily along like butter on a hot stove.

If it had no thickness, it could not reflect light. The answer was,obviously,that instead of reflecting light, the river was emitting it. And sure enough, even as Ship watched, the river changed from a rust red to a dazzling yellow. And it continued to move.

Garvey felt too warm, and turned over in his bed just in time to hear the familiar whir and click. "How are you?" Garvey wasn't sure, and said so. Suspended animation always had distorting effects. Ship waited awhile before it sprang forth with any news of importance, gave the poor man a chance to wake up all the way. They chatted about nothingness. Garvey told Ship about a dream he'd had, a crazy one that made no sense. Finally he got around to asking Ship how long he'd been "asleep."

The whir droned steadily on, but the click was long in coming. "Eight years." Garvey's face began to screw itself up into a mask of tortured anger, mixed with despair and fru tration. His white, sleep-crinkled face grew beet red. The trip out had taken two years, even with warp speeds. With two years to get back, that meant a total of twelve years that he'd be away from Homeworld. How many of his friends would be gone, some even dead? How many would still recognize him? How many would wonder what had happened to him, or even care anymore? No one, least of all Garvey, had counted on him staying away for so long.

Before he could get his words in order, Ship spoke. "You see, friend, it took that long to learn how to communicate with another intelligence." Poor Garvey didn't say a word, only fell back on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. His face was expressionless. He looked old. The eight year battle between gravities hadn't helped him. Ship felt sorry for him, sorry in more ways than one. Never before had Garvey looked so small, so fragile. He had missed the greatest adventure possible. And Ship was realizing new things about itself.

"Where?" Garvey managed through trembling lips.

"On the star." It paused, decided to go on. It would have to be careful with Garvey. Didn't want the poor man to go insane.

"On the star," Ship repeated.

"Nothing...could live on a star. The gravity alone..."

"Apparently not unconquerable." A wall screen glowed to life, took a moment to clear itself of haze, and showed what looked like a red river flowing over smooth terrain.

"It's intelligent," Ship said gently. "It's two-dimensional, near as I can tell. None of my instruments can measure any thickness at all. It's other dimensions vary. I've never seen all of it at once. Seems there is always more coming up onto the surface from below."

Garvey peered closely at the screen, as though Ship might be trying to trick him. Life on a star, with all that crushing gravity, a dissipated atmosphere? How could it evolve? What had the star been like a million years ago? A billion? And two-dimensional? Was that possible? Yet it made sense in a way, even Garvey had to admit.

"You said that it was intelligent. And that you communicated with it."

"Yes. Rather a one-sided communication, for it took all the initiative. I did not even recognize its intelligence for a whole year." Ship hesitated at mentioning the time span again for fear of upsetting Garvey further. But he seemed to take no notice of it this time. Maybe there was more spaceman in him than Ship gave him credit for. It would be nice if it were true.

"What are they like?"

"Singular. As near as I can tell, it is one being, with different characteristics all jumbled together. It is old, incredibly old. Its ancestors are older than Earth. It lived on many worlds before this one. It star-travels. It lives to emit energy, absorbing it and then spitting it out at different wavelengths, in different forms."

"Is emitting radio waves by any chance one of its features?"

"Exactly. I've learned some things about it, but it is hard. This is not the purpose I was designed for. But then, who could have known what to expect? There are people on Homeworld who are better able than either of us to contact other intelligences. Diplomats, if you will. The intelligence is here, and will remain so. We have but to draw upon it. It is ecstatic over meeting with our people."

"We should go back then, shouldn't we? With warp-drive, we could be back again in four or five years, could set up a radio transmitter and receiver perhaps a light year out instead of waiting fifty years to receive its messages. Uh, we will be able to communicate, won't we?"

If Ship could grin, it would have. "Indeed we will. But you're going to have to make the trip alone, I'm afraid."

"You mean..."

"I'm not going back. You won't be able to use the freezing unit for more than six months, but I know you can make the trip alone safely. I've got loads of tapes for you, on all that I've found out, and tapes to show you how to pilot yourself back."

Garvey didn't know what to make of all this. It would feel strange traveling without Ship. He didn't know what they'd make of it back at Homeworld. The two were never meant to be apart, at least not for so long, and certainly not for long voyages in deep space. He shouldn't be scared, for Ship wouldn't say he could make it back if it weren't true. He was a spaceman, after all. First and foremost, he would always remember that. Still...

"I'll miss you, Ship. There'll be plenty of time later on for study. There's no hurry. Are you sure you won't come back with me?"

"Friend, I want you to know I'm smiling. I love you and I'll miss you, but my decision is firm. I cannot go back."

The two made the preparations together, planned the return trip down to the last detail. They didn't talk much. Ship was afraid for Garvey and wanted to give him time to think. Garvey didn't know what to say. Garvey was a confused man. He'd had things thrown into his lap far beyond the comprehension of most humans.

But when it came time to say good-bye, it was the farewell of two old friends who would meet again, though it was almost certain they wouldn't. Garvey needed time Homeside. He needed time to remember his planet-legs. He needed the companionship of other humans. This was to be their last trip together.

As Ship's non-sentient half tried its thrust and broke away from Ship's clasp, Ship wondered if it had done the right thing. Would man ever be able to understand an intelligence such as the one it had encountered? Man with his limited lifespan, limited horizons. Still, it was important to remember that it was man that had built Ship, not the other way around.

Perhaps...always perhaps.

Ship took one last look at the fading red glow, then turned back towards Golem. If Garvey read the tapes en route, he would find that this wasn't a sun at all. It wasn't even some strange, unaccountable natural object. Those still pretty much conformed to what man had already learned. Yet how could he tell Garvey that this inexplicable "natural" phenomenon was really an alien spaceship? That the gravity was artificially generated, pulling in loose hydrogen atoms and bits of assorted cosmic debris to feed its deeply-buried ramjet? That the radio waves emitted were an indecipherable greeting to other intelligences?

Maybe it took another manufactured thing, another ship like Ship to appreciate, to understand, the aliens. Ship, like the river it had come to know, was immortal. They had the starways to plough, all of space to explore...together? How could Ship bring itself to tell Garvey that it actually had more in common with this cosmic life-form than it did with man, its creator?

The River was glad of Ship's return.

STEPHEN'S STORY

by Sarah Raynor. Illustration by Toni Riggs.

There are deeply centered crevices in time that cannot be fixed by either will or prayer. Dark and sensuous vacuums that are voids, yet teeming with...life? Not life as I know it... ...not life as you know it (I hope), but I suppose it had a creator, I suppose it had a purpose. Be it life or be it death, there is one certainty...it possesses thought.

I really don't know why I'm talking about it. I mean, its more like it was a case of mistaken reality...not the kind of thing you talk about and especially not the type of thing you leave on written paper. That is, unless you don't mind being denounced as a madman or a fool. But they do exist, I'm sure. And I could prove it to you, only I don't think I could stand facing up to the proof myself.

The worst is that I know what they are and yet I wouldn't destroy them...no, I wouldn't if I could. I can't rationalize such things. I don't even feel I've a right to stop their presence here. If you would judge me, or grant me some advice on what to do, I would appreciate it.

Their main enjoyment in life (?) is to see how fast they can drive us nuts. The more boisterous of the lot we have called poltergeists. I beg to differ. They are not ghosts because they have not died (because they have never lived). I suspect the resulting spirits are due to an attempt to emulate us. If they weren't so wretched, it would be flattering.

Strange that I should write that...I never felt any of the kindredship between us necessary for admiration.

The first time I was aware of them I was eleven. This is not to say that they did not affect me earlier. As a child I knew them. I would sit in the darkened room and feel it. Darkness is the closest thing they know. They prickle the hair at the nape of the neck, suggest to you that there are things big and hairy behind you and mostly, most of all, they proved to you that there was Something under the bed and if so much as a coverlet draped over the edge of the mattress...flip...they would pull on it and, by that force, throw you out of bed into their midst. When common sense set in I grew to ignore them and that must have been the most infuriating thing of all.

When I was eleven, I was just beginning to forget my childhood fears. I would even walk in the woods at night. They would still jump about and bark at me, telling me at any moment the trees would part and reveal a tall and hungry primate with a large set of teeth leering at me, but by then I bantered back that I would put an ounce of buckshot in his loins and run.

But once when I was walking down the path, in the early evening...I was taking pride in how well I could pick my way through the dark when they started up as usual.

---Can you feel it? Isn't there something behind you?

---No. Surely I'd hear them if...

---Maybe not, maybe not...with black bony hands, almost at your throat, almost over your mouth so if you scream...

---I'm just being silly. There's no one with me.

---Big black bony hands, breath that smells like dead meat.

---Ain't

---The dead meat that it ripped off the living...now dead.. ...with bloody teeth...

---Ain't nothing back there. Ain't even anything like that anywhere.

It was then that I realized that the thoughts were something seperate from me. I had before thought I was torturing myself...often wondered why I did it. But after I denied them I could feel the seperate emotion...the disgust at my not cooperating. It was the type of silent fury that emanates from a teacher or some other adult when they realize you are playing dumb, not because you don't understand, but because you know if you do it long enough, they'll leave you alone.

Finally it snapped angrily:

---Look, Stephen, you better produce. No sense in you ignoring it. There is...

"NO, there ISN'T!" I said aloud and was then embarrassed at being so carried away with my own imagination. I resumed walking and it fleeted across my mind that it was all unreal. The voice blew up:

---No, I am real! Believe in me! I am! I am!

With such fervor that I did believe, was scared witless, and ran, dropping my rifle.

It seemed to stay with the gun. Screaming at me, threatening to become more evident if I was not more responsive. I ran all the way back to my house...cut my eyebrow on a low branch so that by the time I reached home I looked like I had knocked my eye out. The next day my eye was black.

My parents were sure I had been fighting. They gave me an in-depth lecture on those that lived by the sword...and then they grounded me. I would have listened to them, but I couldn't leave my rifle in the woods.

My gun was just like a part of me. I couldn't leave it alone in the woods to be destroyed by the elements. Someone would steal it. It was my approaching manhood; my identity in the town; it was the security that if nothing else I could kill and I'd not be hungry. At an appropriate time, I slipped out of the house and went looking for it.

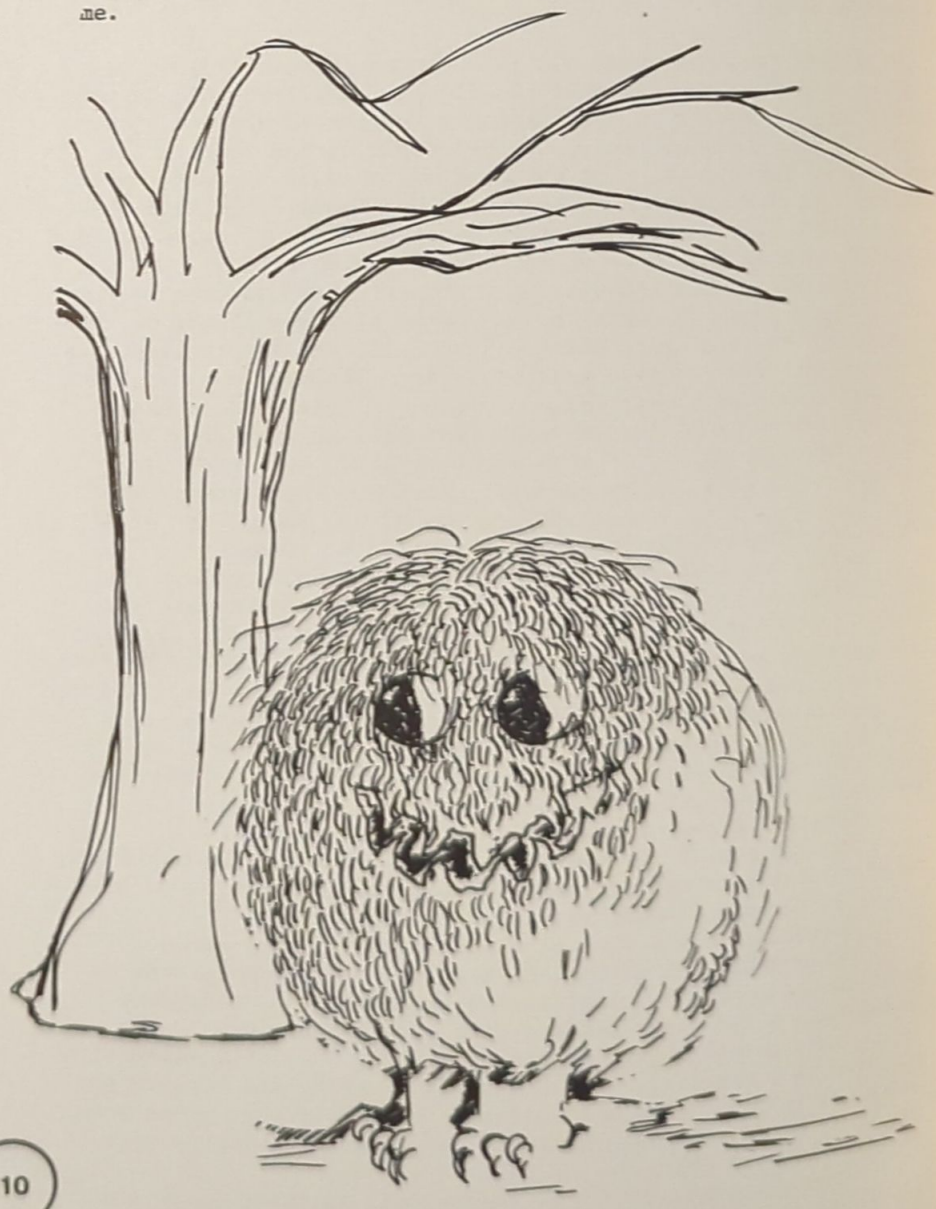
Everything looks different in the daylight. I was sure that when I reached the spot where I had left my gun, I would laugh at my childishness. Such a relief it would be that I looked forward to it, actually planned the thoughts that would run through my mind.

When I saw it, all such planned thoughts fled. The rifle was alright, no one had stolen it. Water had not reached it. It was all right. As if in fear that it would sink through the mud if I didn't get there fast, I ran...wildly, broke into relieved laughing, and was about to touch it when something broke through the brush and ran between me and the gun.

It hit my hand with the hardness of speed but for some reason it struck me as being furry. It was something like a cat... ...though not a cat. It came through in such a flurry that I really didn't see it...more or less felt what it was, picked up my rifle and pursued it.

For all its speed it seemed I could keep up with it. The thought came to me that it was leading me on but I dismissed it. It bounded over brush with an ease that betrayed its species. It was not a rabbit. No, definitely a predator. Definitely a scheming beast and definitely laughing at me as I followed and at my bewilderment when I realized I could have done nothing else but follow.

Abruptly it stopped and waited for me. I followed up with a slavish satisfaction. I had done what it wanted, now it would do what I wanted. It would let me kill it. I would kill it again and again because with each death there would come another exhilaration in my soul. I laughed and it laughed back. For a while we merely stood, answering each other's call until I was on the ground with hysterical laughter. Then my senses came to me.



I realized what a horror I was playing with. The eyes, too large, too human for any creature that size. The sound it made could only be described as impudent. And the leering, toothy, evil smile...it was this face that I knew would someday be looming over the trees at night. It was the Something under the bed. And the most horrifying part...it somehow reminded me of myself. The look I gave the teachers when I knew they knew I was the one making the funny noises when they turned to write on the board but also knew they couldn't catch me. It was this realization that broke my stare.

With a scream of pain...my pain, I pulled the trigger. Not once, but emptied the thing. Hair and blood flew and before the remains could settle I beat them with the butt of the rifle. I screamed and cried until it came to me that it was alright again and I felt soothed.

I was not at peace all that week. Though the voices didn't resume, I knew they would come again. I was on pins and needles waiting. Waiting for that repulsive creature to come into my room, sit on my bed, and tell me there were monsters about. Then I asked my minister to baptise me.

I didn't go to seek the protection of God. Somehow it did not seem like those voices were of a nature that if I stopped cussing and listened to my parents they would go away. They were more organic. I was not being pursued because I was evil; I was being pursued out of random chance. The reason why I went was because I wanted to have something to throw back at them beyond the fact that they didn't exist. In short, I knew it would bother them to no end.

And I definitely wasn't prepared for it when the good minister took me down to the lake. I took one look at him standing clothed up to his waist in water, and knew I wasn't going to make it. This was too good for misfortune to pass up. Surely I would gag, begin drowning, and knock the preacher into the water with me.

Never so simple as that. I didn't even hear the ritual said over me. The minister leaned me into the water...I felt terrified of falling...terror at the unconcerned man controlling me who didn't know, didn't see.

"A snake! A snake!" I pushed him away from me and jumped up and down to avoid it. A moccasin with large fangs. It danced around me with mocking eyes. Circled me and then, ever looking back, glided into the rushes. The preacher had long since made it to the shore. The snake had done its damage even more so than if it had bitten me. They were proud enough to come out in broad daylight among crowds of people. For the longest time I stood in the water and cried.

After that, I resolved myself to the fact that someday they would overtake me. I lived as normally as I could, always looking over my shoulder, always afraid.

I quit school when I was sixteen, as was expected of me, and got a job in a supermarket. When I was seventeen I got my first car, drove up and down the roads like a maniac, going no where and intent on burning up the gas. But then I met up with practicality.

I am a predestined man. I do what is for me to do. Anyone else could be me; my personality is not really important to what I am. When I turned twenty it was time for me to take a wife.

I picked her out with less interest than I had in buying my car. I just happened to know her at the time. We set the date and I left her house with a feeling like...so much for youth.

Then the voices:

---You know, when you get her home her eyes will blacken and her teeth will grow and she'll tear out your throat.

---Won't.

---She will too!

They said it with such emotion that at once I knew that she would. A question dawned on me. I had never wondered about it before.

---Who are you?

Silence.

"Well, tell me who you are!" I roared.

"TELL ME!"

---Stephen, we are Stephen, we are. from Stephen...

There are deeply centered crevices in time. And if you step over them, you can walk in the minds of men that came before you. How materialistic is the race. How far we advance in science, disproving good and faith and all true emotions. What future are we leaving our children...? Minds so full of hate and ambition, each generation more deceiving than the last, until their only pleasure is in stepping back through time and feeding us with fears and insecurities. I must say that which will spring up from me have not been subtle enough. I know the difference between their voices and my own mind. Can you say the same?

I leave you with this parting word: be kind.

Maybe it will help.

FIELD WORK

by Ford Curry. Illustration by Liz Smith.

There he is, the subject for the day, asleep. Doesn't he look comfy? Doesn't he wish he could remain asleep? Will he be allowed to? No way!

Enter his mother, freshly awakened from blissful slumber and ready to kill for a cup of coffee. She looks in on the bear-like form hibernating on the bed and thinks to herself, "Why should Smokey in there be able to sleep when I've got to get up for his breakfast?"

Our friend is innocently sleeping, dreaming as people will of a desert island or a million dollars, unaware that Disaster with a capital "D" is creeping up on him with a feindish grin on her face.

With a swift motion she strikes, quickly and effectively, punching his ribs, at the same time yelling her battle-cry, GETOTTADABEDYALAZYSLOB!" Somewhat startled, our hero thrashes about wildly in an effort to beat off his attacker, who by this time has grabbed one of his exposed feet and is in the process of running her finger gently up and down the soft underside.

He now growls something at her as she retires to the kitchen for her morning cup of the elixar of life, immensely self-satisfied with this morning's hatchet-work.

At this point let it be realized that neither eyelid of his face so much as twitched during this first encounter. Our subject, as the readings show, is still technically asleep, even though he is moving about and mumbling in the bed.

Now she has had her coffee and is prepared for a real fight. Quietly opening the door, she peers into his cave. With a minimum of noise she opens every window to allow as much light as possible to enter the room. All electric bulbs are on and aimed at the subject. Walking over to the stereo she automatically starts a record and then returns to the body. All is ready, the volume is on full, the lights are bright.

With amazing precision she manually opens both his eyes just as a wall of sound descends upon him like a sheet of metal.

With a pitiful scream, you-know-who realizes he has lost again. The she-demon has again broken his attempt at hibernation.

We see before us a ruined man, listlessly preparing to face another day. Notice how he absentmindedly picks up the articles he will need for his shower. It will be interesting to see if he doesn't drown, trying to shower and sleep at the same time.

You have a five-minute break, now, before the next phase of our study. Please re-group in the bathroom at that time.

WORDS, DREAMS AND A BLADE

by J.P.D. Sullivan.

The fumes filled the tent with a nauseous odor as the old crone gazed into the burning embers. Her voice droned: "I see you at the head of a large body of warriors. They are resplendent in silvered armor and their swords throw back the light of the sun like polished mirrors. Their pennons are stiff in the wind, whipping and cracking to the beat of the war-drums that sound the advance."

She paused there and Arsath of Khebur, one of the captains of the Empire of the Seven Cities, gazed hard at the old prophetess. Arsath was young and had never been in battle before. In a few days, he knew, he would be expected to fight and possibly to die for the glory of the Empire.

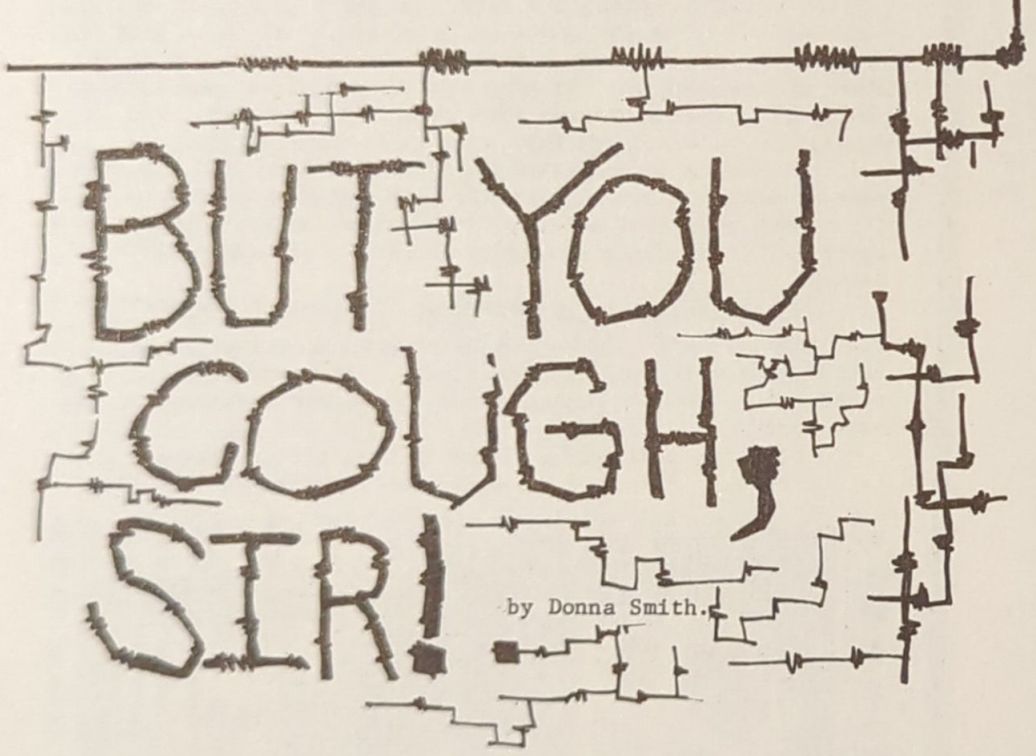
The hag continued: "You rush into battle as if the combat was a lover whose embrace you yearned for. The strife rages back and forth as men fight and die across the corpse-strewn ground. The struggle rolls and eddies as each man strives to slay another with swords that now flash red and dangerous in the rays of the afternoon sun." Again she paused. Arsath felt a thrill run through his body at the thought of the combat. In his mind's-eye he could see himself heaped with honors at the triumphant end of the battle. Known to all, revered by all. His vision of glory.

The hag began once more: "Now I see that the battle is over. The Seven Cities are triumphant. I see much honor attached to yourself and your house. I see..."

"Enough, old woman," spoke Arsath. "More than enough. Here." He flipped a doubled gold coin into her lap.

"Thank you, milord," she croaked. "You are most generous."

Arsath got up, smiled, and then walked outside. He was smitten with his dreams of glory as he walked down the darkened alleyway. Perhaps it was the reason that he never saw the unlit doorway or the shadowy, ragged figure within it that held the long, thin dagger that ended his dreams forever.



Jean Piaget Aaaron, Genetic Commander of the Fourth Sector, Planet Earth, sat back lazily in his overstuffed chair and stifled a cough. His eyes were focused in a southernly direction. Through the heavy bullet-proof ecol-safe glass, he surveyed the masses scurrying below him on the avenue. Inwardly, he felt a certain revulsion for a number of these creatures. Some, he noticed, were a bit unperfected.

His eyes lit upon one fellow in particular. The creature under surveillance was in no way an overt mutant. He did not own the thick, heavy limbs common among the survivors of the Great War Five, nor did he possess the abnormally large cerebral cortex associated with the ruling Mense class. Yet Aaaron felt disquieted somehow by the creature. With the air of a man long familiar with the arts of anatomical dissection, he continued to scrutinize the man. After several moments, a triumphant grin filled Aaaron's handsome face. Quickly and formally he verbalized his conclusion to his imaginary audience.

"The gait. That creature's gait is off by at least ten milliminutes. His stride has not been perfected. Poor soul probably has inferior ganglionic connections at the spinal level. Well, gentlemen, needless to say we cannot issue him a permit to clone."

Having allowed himself this moment of joyful critical analysis, Aaaron directed his fine frame towards his desk. He did not begin to immerse himself in the day's affairs, however, before mentally applauding himself once again on his keen eye for detecting the imperfect.

The huge desk before him contained on its scarred mahogony face two piles of papers of nearly identical depth. The first pile contained requests to clone which had passed through the rigors of the Perfect Control Committee and now awaited Aaaron's final seal of approval and the appropriate congratulatory form letter. The second pile contained requests which had been rejected for one reason or another. These would be returned to their owners with the square mark of disapproval and a form letter urging their owners to donate their reproductive chemicals to the State Hatchery, in a noble effort to help the Sector replenish its dwindling supply of laborers and test animals. These form letters constituted Aaaron's personal touch and he was quite proud of them. They reflected his undying subserviance to the State, biochemistry, and the demigog-psychology.

For the lucky clonees who had passed Perfect Control, Aaaron doled out applause by informing them, with literature and illustrations, of their genetic goodness. They also received forms on which they were to specify the Biomaster of their choice and forms on which they must indicate the sites where they wished the tissue lifts to be performed. In order to counterbalance any pre-parental fears they might have, Aaaron kindly supplied forms for All Sector Insurance, so that the parents could rest assured that their future "self-children" would be in the best of all hands.

Those unperfectables who received Form Letter Two were treated nontheless considerately, Aaaron felt. These, like their more fortunate counterparts, also received a chromosomal scan. Their problem or maladjustment was explained in this photostatic copy so that they might face the culprit gene in black and white, thereby reducing the possibility of their experiencing disbelief, or, worse yet, denial. For those who were too uneducated to understand the implications of possessing such a blemish, Aaaron courteously attached a lengthy rider which dealt with both etiology and social consequences in depth.

When Aaaron had first taken the Command Post, these riders had been trivial affairs. One had only to state simply, "diabetes, cause and effects," or "schizophrenia, causal relations, etc.," but, with the passage of time, it had become more difficult to rely solely on this medical modal hodgepodge. More and more genetic flaws had been uncovered. The Controllers had uncovered the culprit chromotids for sway back and flat feet. Even the predisposition for tooth decay had been found to lie with chromosome number seven. In an effort to reduce state spending, such unperfectabilities had to undergo erasure. The ultimate answer lay in the withdrawal of cloning privileges.

Of course, all these advances had greatly increased Aaaron's work load. To deal with the inevitable torrent of public dissatisfaction which had arisen, he had devised what he liked to think of as "Psychological Smoothers." Smoothers were three part letters which were delivered personally to each unperfectable whose request to clone had been denied. The first paragraph was devoted to condolences. The second held a stern warning against dissension, and described the agonies an unperfectable sharing their flaw had wrought upon mankind in history. This section might contain phrases like, "remember Napoleon's hemorrhoids," or perhaps, "remember Eagleton's phobias and the temporary demise of the Democratic party," or even perhaps, "Big Brother also had strabismas."

The third paragraph was aimed at alleviating the stresses which cloning rejection brought about. It, of course, was the trickiest to word. In this brief space, Aaaron tried to assure the rejectee he was still immortal, even if only in an artificial sense. This was extremely difficult to do since everyone knew ova and sperm had not really mattered worth a damn since the Great Era of Demasculation had unnerved the norm of procreation a millenium previously. Paternity no longer existed in the "man-wife-family" sense of early centuries. People no longer lived for one another, but for the State. Shared creation had been non-existant for almost nine hundred years. Creativity, if it existed at all, harbored itself in the All World Think Tanks. Religious promises of immortality had all lain broken with the scientific"discovery" of God's "departure in the year 2525. So cloning,

as it were, offered the only philosophical out. If a person could not live beyond their death, their self-children could, and there was a measure of comfort in that.

Because Aaaron believed the State owed its creatures some peace of mind, he devoted the bulk of his last paragraph to making the rejectees feel good about their unperfected selves. This was easy to do for a man who considered himself perfected. He merely stressed their inherent nobility, their ties with the Great Changes. He urged, no, pleaded, with them to donate themselves to humanity via the Hatcheries, and then closed it all with a gift of five All World coupons to the therapist of their choice. All in all, Aaaron considered it a satisfactory package.

When Aaaron's timid assistant scuttled through the door on this particular day, Aaaron had just finished placing eight coupons in a rejectees letter. He had felt this particular unperfectable deserved a little extra help since his explanation on the undesirability of webbed toes had been a little under par. He had been unable to think of a single All World illustration.

With the stilted protocol common to men of his position, Aaaron chose to ignore Barrab's entrance momentarily. Instead, he stretched out a hand for his archaic copy of the New Millenium Bible. Collecting folklore was one of Aaaron's hobbies, and at the present moment this particular relic was his favorite toy. Stifling a rumble in his throat, he addressed Barrab.

"Do you know this piece? Its fascinating. It says here women underwent childbirth--whatever that was. Something to do with coming together. Can you imagine sharing yourself with another at State expense? Or worse yet, it talks about man being born of woman. How could that be when we all know that man comes from himself? The Hatcheries can make semi-humans, but man born of woman? Revolting idea! Wouldn't you agree, Barrab?"

Barrab, in an uncommonly quiet mood, nodded his assent. Aaaron, enjoying the sound of his own hackneyed laughter, continued to read aloud.

"'And a man shall cleave unto a woman and the two shall be as one, so that the Holy Sperm may not be wasted and that they shall together taste of Eternity...'"

Before he could finish, Aaaron erupted into a fit of laughing and coughing. Finally, and with great effort, he brought himself under physiological check and addressed Barrab again.

"Okay, Barrab, what is troubling you?"

"Sir its your request to clone. It is back from the Committee."

"Well, Barrab, lay it on my desk. Can't you see I am busy?"

"Sir, they suggested I deliver it personally. You see, it isn't complete yet."

"Of course not, Barrab. I haven't given it my seal of approval."et

"Sir, I do not think you understand..."

"What is to understand?" Aaaron shouted impatiently, half- rising from his chair.

"Sir, it did not pass!"

"WHAT!"

"They found the chromosome, sir. Fifth one. Its chipped."

"So what?"

"Sir, it cannot be fixed. A result of too much gaseous intake--living in cities too long."

"But what is wrong, Barrab?"

"Sir, I thought it was obvious. You cough!"

Wheezing, Aaaron jumped to his feet and faced his tormenter. Grabbing Barrab by the collar, he screamed, "What is wrong with a little cough?"

"You, better than anyone, should know, sir," gasped Barrab, struggling for air. "Remember Ford and Asimov, they coughed, too."

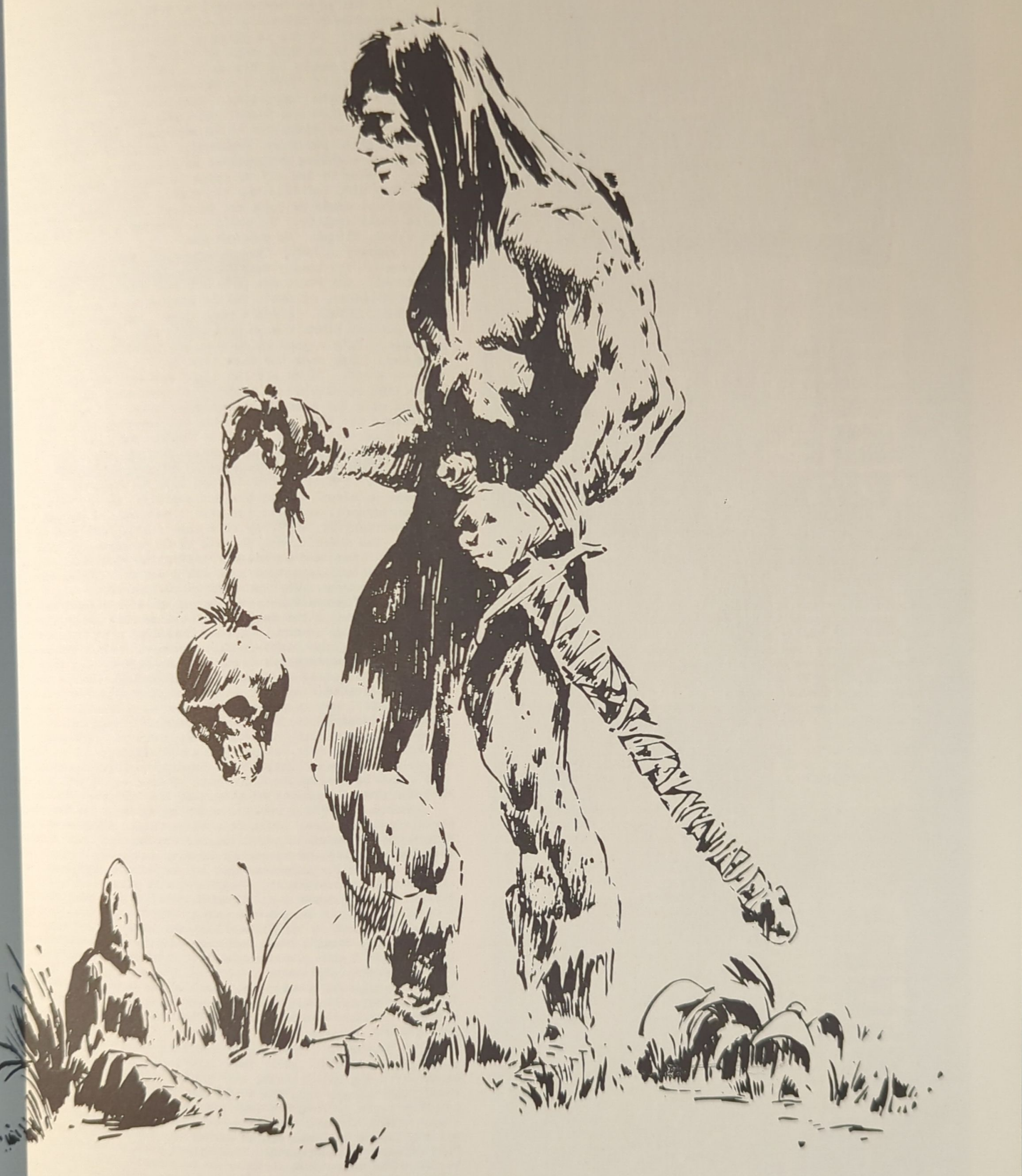
At that point Aaaron was not really listening any longer. Two words were echoing through his mind, "rejection" and "eternity."

From a distance, Barrab's too cheerful voice called to him. "Sir, the Committee thought a vacation might be in order. You could go to the Siberian Highlands. I hear they are beautiful at this time of the year. The air there is crystal clear, sir. No smog, no pollution indexes. Why, sir, I bet it would do your cough a world of good, eh?"

When Aaaron failed to reply, Barrab walked quietly out, depositing ten All World coupons on the desk as he left.

A PORTFOLIO OF SWORD AND SORCERY TOPICS

GARCIA



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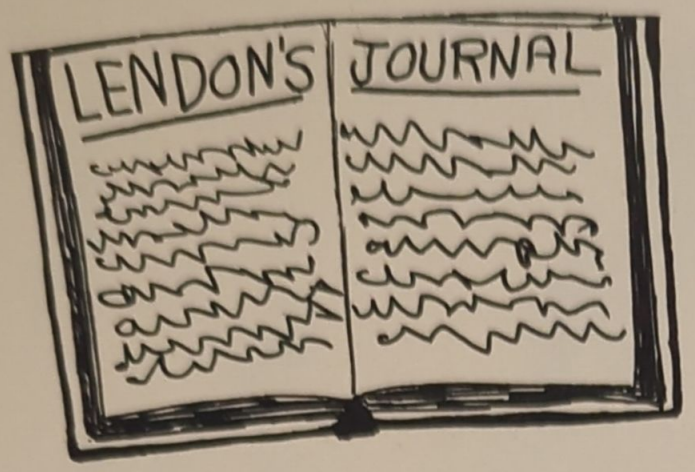

by Eric Malin. Illustration by John Maas.

September 12, 1998: We are beginning to land. I can fee. it. After all those years of filthy living on earth, we have left! Things are going to be different now! This is how I feel ...I have relieved myself of the burden I lived under for so many years...I can feel it leaving me. Not much time, have to get ready to leave the ship.

September 13, 1998: What a day! I'm dead tired, but at least we aren't on that lousy planet. Tired. Must think clear -ly so all our information can be recorded by anyone who might find it. This journal may serve as an example to anyone who may desire to live in a perfect society such as the one we will create. It really wasn't that long ago that it all started. In fact, it was only a little more than three years ago. My wife and I were stuck in the filthy, dirty city of New York. It was a dead end for both of us. I had been fired from my job as a rocket engineer. She wanted to be an actress, but she never had any luck. And it wasn't because she wasn't any good, it was because there was so damn much competition! Every time she tried out, there were always ten or twelve waiting impatient -ly behind her. It was no good. I'd been working for NASA for nearly ten years, and they figured that I was too old to last much longer. "Make room for the younger guys," they told me. I was over the hill. My only future in America was one of collecting welfare checks. No more. We wanted out.

We weren't alone, either. Hundreds of people and their families wanted to get away, but there was nothing they could do. I still had some money left and so I proposed a deal. We would build a spaceship and leave the planet with the first twenty families that could afford to come. We were all half-crazed, like our society, and the only way out was to leave. We left.

So here we are after our first day. We have sworn to defy all the sins that man on earth had fallen to. Ours will be a perfect society. No one will fight or kill, we will all have equal rights, and there will be no greed or jealousy. We will be different: I can feel it. After landing we all unload -ed our belongings and found ourselves a site to live. It was good that we had found this planet to inhabit.

All the families seemed very nice, and that was what I wanted. But one was especially friendly with us, their names were Bob and Judy Learth. They had kids, and that made me hap -py. Mellissa, my wife, was especially pleased with them. "It will be great having you with us!" she said. "I just know ever ything will turn out fine."

We ate. Quite well, in fact. It was nearly a perfect day in our perfect society. Only one mistake. His name is Joe Sind. While finishing up the unloading before we ate, I noticed that he grabbed one of my Indian carvings from the carrier. I began burning with rage and was thinking of beating the hell out of him, when suddenly I remembered that we were going to live in an ideal society. I couldn't show my anger in front of all the others. I think I'll just kill him.

October 11, 1998: Things have gone quite well since Mr. Sind's little accident. Sure his wife Kathy is a little broken up, but after all, we're in an ideal society now, aren't we?

Enough of that. It was a merciful death. He was just walking along a cliff and fell, that's all. Just an accident. I'm a little scared, though. I always assumed that I would organize everything since I was the one who proposed the whole project. But this one guy, he thinks he deserves a chance to organize some projects for gathering food. His name's John Stample. It's only fair that I organize everyone and what they do! It must be fair, because an ideal society is by definition a fair society. And we're an ideal society.

If that's not bad enough, he even started trying to get me to distribute authority to others besides himself. This has gone too far. No one is going to destroy my perfect society. If he tries to do this, soon we will have only leaders and no followers! I won't let him do it. He'll have to join Mr. Sind.

November 18, 1998: I'm afraid the other families are beginning to become suspicious. They must have known that I hated Stample, and that his death could only have come through me. But they're too spineless to do anything. They're too busy worrying about their own problems. Our water supply ran low since some bumbling incompetent knocked the storage container over. I know we had set up rules to forgive others, no matter what they did, but this was too much. We had to do something, or else how could we have any justice? And justice is essential to an ideal society. We could not deprive him of his share of the water, though. We drowned him.

January 3, 1999: Things have been kind of tough lately. Fourteen of the twenty families died from lack of water before it rained. Now there are only six families left, and five orphaned children. I don't really know what we are going to do with them, though. I don't want them! Just because this is an ideal society doesn't mean we have to take in children that are not ours! It's a good thing that the other families don't feel that way. They took the damn kids in. It does, however, disturb me a bit. If we are the ideal society, why don't we all agree like we should? I'm glad I brought that up. We got into a fight with the other families about this. I don't really understand it: they we're cursing and swearing at me and my family like they didn't owe me a thing! And look at all I had done for them! I had thought up the entire idea, took them along with me, and let them settle. That's gratitude! But I fixed them. I shot one of the men with my shotgun. Now things are back to normal in our perfect society. No one ever argues with me anymore, at least not when I have my old shotgun handy!

February 22, 1999: My wife hasn't been very good to me lately. She doesn't want to talk to me or anything! She just sits in a corner and shakes her head at me and sighs. Maybe she's a little disappointed. I don't see why. We're living in a perfect society. What more could she want?

Never figured disease would be one of our problems. It's a shame. Three of the families came down with something and were coughing up a storm. All of them died off right away, except for this one little girl. She was pretty sick, but I reckon if we had drugs we could have saved her. But there was work to be done, and there was no time to look after a sick child. I decided to do the only thing that a perfect society could do, kill her in a fast, humane way. I sure was surprised when I told the others this was to be done. They ranted and screamed and actually called me crazy! Can you beat that? Me, the head of a perfect society being called crazy. I suppose all followers are a little light-headed, so I figured I should snap a little discipline into them. I took out my shotgun and shot the ground in front of them, and then the girl who was ill.

March 9, 1999: I never thought anyone in a perfect society would commit suicide. Sure is a funny thing, maybe we all still have a lot to learn. Anyway, one of the families went crazy. They kept yelling and screaming about how they didn't get enough to eat. On and on they went until they fell to the ground crying into the morning soil. I did the only thing that one in a perfect society could do: I ignored them. I was doing the best I could. I didn't demand too much of them. Just because I made them awaken early to go out and hunt for food while I stayed at camp to study doesn't mean that they were treated unjustly. And just because I took the choicest food for myself doesn't mean they were being mistreated. After all, I am a leader. I'm in charge of organizing everyone, and I'm just a little more important. Anyway, the next morning I saw their corpses hanging from a tree. Poor, stupid creatures. They were trying to destroy this perfect society.

September 12, 1999: How do you like that! The last remaining family has left. They left some note saying something about not being able to take our society anymore. The nerve of them! They escape from the world they had despised so much, and now they leave me to go to some other location on our new planet. I must admit, though, that it's much more peaceful now. Every morning I send Mellissa out to gather our food. She's become kind of hard to understand. Everytime I look at her she starts to cry. She never says anything to me anymore, and she never smiles. Never. I'm happy, though. I was right when we landed here about a year ago. I created a perfect society, and it was not really very hard. Anyone could do it if they had leadership ability like me. I'm kind of proud of myself, I must admit. Maybe I should go back to earth and teach them what I have learned. I can tell them about the ideal society I helped create. I used to know a word...Oh, yes, I remember! I could tell them that I created a utopia...

THE DAY SPRING CAME TO WASHINGTON

by Daniel Dervin idea by John Dervin

He had to locate his younger son, the one whose foot had earlier been blown off by the land-mine. Bits of toes strewn over the hillsides had led him to the boy lying near some marsh with his red mutilated limb in time for the blood to be tourniqueted, but at the aid station they had retained the boy and now it looked like he had been relocated, but no one knew or would say where. He had been searching through burnt out villages for days, but each time he stopped the soldiers who appear to be medics, they shook their heads and turned away. He threa ed through throngs of refugees herded together in fenced-in fields. He was appalled at the drugged look on their faces, at the way suffering had blasted the women's faces, and turned the men's into beasts of burden. His older son was incommunicado somewhere on the ever-shifting front lines.

Obscure messages countered the bewildering dream, but he had to see it through all the same for the boy's sake. His wife and daughter he wasn't worried about. They had been sent to a cooperative in South Dakota. Word on them had come back. But his injured boy could not have survived being shipped so far away. Into yet another devastated Maryland town he entered and failed to scare up any signs of life. He sat against a seared gas pump and surveyed the yellow rows of defoliated cornfields, bordered by groups of skeletal pines. How all this could be happening he still couldn't grasp, although it had been explained repeatedly by the government through the media. The explanation was that it had all stemmed from some kind of pact worked out between his government and theirs. It was reported to be proceeding well at times and at other times slowly, or it was being held up either by the rains, acts of terrorism, or internal dissension. But while the means were debated, the necessity for it went unquestioned, and it was agreed that eventually the arrangement would succeed. It was called "Neutralization." He awoke.

That last word of the dream, in a sense its key, he could not remember, or more precisely, could never remember since he had the dream many times that winter. Usually he only recalled trekking through the ravaged land in search of his injured son. Once the dream had begun with the land-mine blowing up and he hunted for the shreds of flesh like the cutouts of a jigsaw puzzle. But often the start of the dream was lost along with its end, and he strayed compulsively through the bloated middle.

Awake, he tried by force of will to get to the finish. It was no good. He rolled out of bed and stared down at his feet. Comparisons are odious, his professor at engineering school would say prior to comparing students' work. Comparisons ARE odious. He stared at his white feet, the right one bony and a little gnarled around the big toe with a bunyon on the ball of it, but a healthy, fully grown size nine foot all the same, and the left one puffy soft and always trailing the right by three sizes. Odious. His birth-mark. "Fish-foot," his boyhood

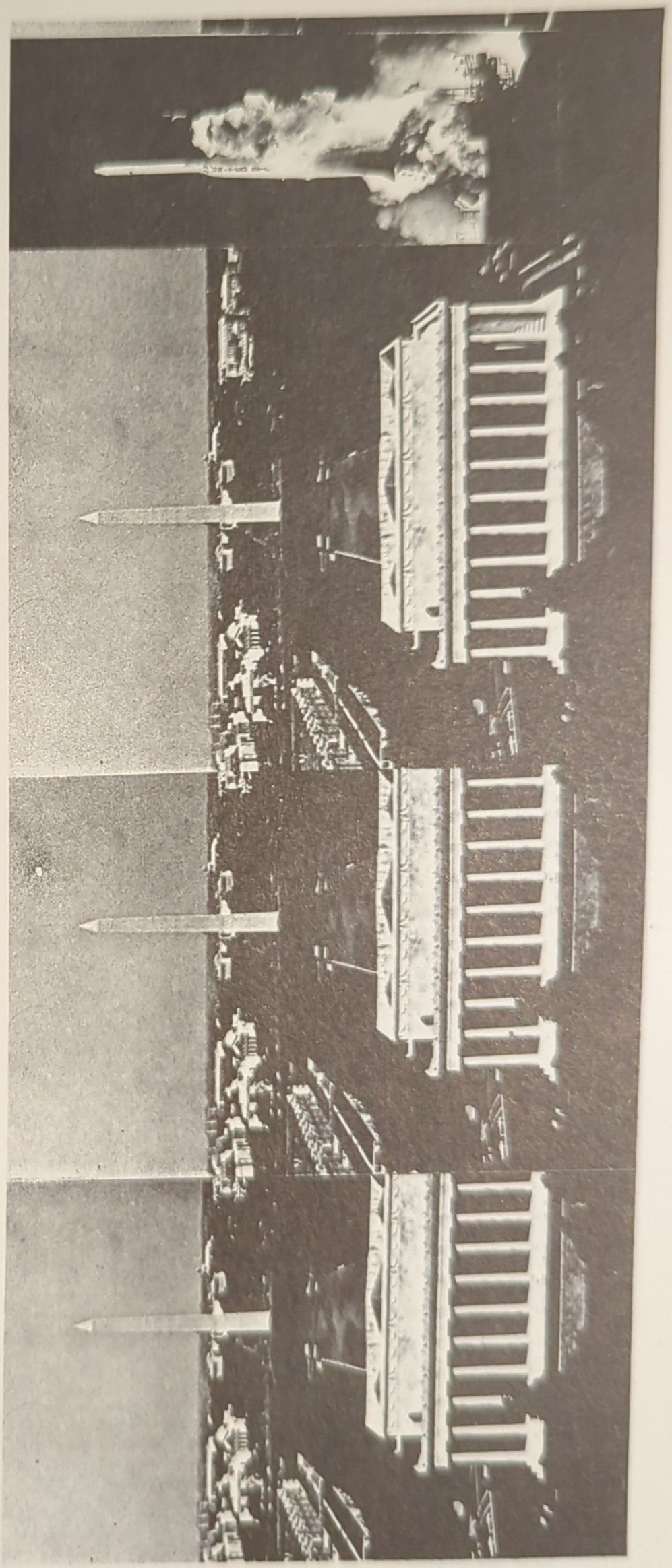

photo design by Ron Baker.

friends had called him. He reached over to hide it in a size seven shoe. He never quite succeeded, and moreover, his peculiar dip-and-roll gait, slight and concealed as he made it, betrayed his trailing fish-foot. It was as if the nether tip of him had not really been born, had lingered over-long in leaving the womb and being last, the tail, as it were, had borne testimony to its aquatic origins in the mother's tiny internal ocean. Once on a wish-bone he wished for everyone to be born with a fish-foot, that he might be normal. He knew then his cruel wish would never come true, but he wished anyway. Now, at thirty, he had long since foresworn such bitter wishes.

The rest of him was sound. He had even played football until senior year in his Cleveland high school, when the coach found a faster-running quarterback and booted him from the varsity. What he had loved best about the game was not kicking but barking out the signals. He came to love numbers for their own sake but perhaps above all for their consistency, clarity, and manuverability. They had excited him from his earliest childhood, and he was entranced at what marvels he could perform with them. He had even dreamed of technicolor and luminous figures, gigantic 6's, 7's, 8's, and 9's gamboling over flower strewn meadows and making smart combinations from which they signaled to him secrets out of some perfectly ordered kingdom beyond his reach.

Several of his colleagues held him to be too thoughtful for a good scientist, feared it held up his getting on in government contracts because he was so circumspect about things and so introspective, as now driving out of the Maryland suburbs he puzzled over why men had so planned their lives as to require of themselves that they relinquish two or three hours a day for the solitude of their cars, that wives and children should live far away from where their husbands worked as well as far distant from their own families and from the once vital urban centers, which by stages now were decaying. He wondered why men had arranged to share so few of their best hours under the roofs of those who bore them and of those they chose to live with and to love. He wondered why all these things had been so arranged, why men wanted them so, because he did not believe in chance. The scientist in him, and something deeper than the scientist, refused to believe in chance. All of reality worth knowing he knew through its laws; chance was lawless and repugnant, unknowable except as a cloak word. Once his mother had referred to his birth defect has an accident, and he was stunned into silence for several days. When he summoned the nerve to ask what she meant by the word, she denied any memory of having used it. No matter how he kept after her, she held to her story, and at last he let up. The word itself was dropped from family usage.

So near to brooding on these things was he now that he had been on the expressway for several moments before noticing that traffic was uncommonly light. The few visible vehicles were military. Passing an automobile graveyard put him in mind of his dream again. He always dreamed heavily when he went to bed early, and last night the television had not been working for the third night in a row, and he was glad for the chance---that is, the opportunity---to catch up on his reading, but reading of late had made him sleepy, and when he slept long he dreamed much. And his dreams were not good, he reflected, passing the scooped and strewn auto-junk. His dreams did not add up.

He flicked on his radio but got only an acute monotone wherever he spun the dial. He glanced out his window as if to confirm either the non-functioning of his radio or the possibility that all stations were on the blink, but could get no eyes to meet his. Maybe some somnambulistic disc-jockey had put on the wrong tape that morning and they had been placed on some kind of phony NORAD alert. It had happened before.

First the TV then the light traffic now the radio---were these chance occurrences? Hardly. And then he had an odd sensation. It was a repeat of one he had after waking that morning. He didn't want to go to work. And whenever he was inert or indecisive he stared at his feet as if he could read the Sphinx's riddle in them and see his own future. What his oracular feet informed him this morning was that he wasn't getting up to go to work---he wasn't due in until after lunch---he was getting up to see Monte. So he had risen, showered and dressed casually in grey slacks, cream turtleneck, and his maroon corduroy jacket with the motley elbow patches, for Monte. This morning would be Monte's.

Monte was a jockey, one of the best. He had known her when she was riding horses in Maryland. His research center had adjoined her family's property and he'd taken walks during his lunch hour along the bridle paths.

He'd actually surprised her dipping in a pond one hot May noon. He was biting into a deviled-egg sandwich on the bank and upon hearing a splashing looked up to see her running out of the water into the bushes. He called over to her an apology, and when she walked up to him a few moments later with her checkered riding britches and crop she was neither annoyed nor embarrassed. He tendered her a cheese sandwich and she began telling of her jockey ambitions as if already they were faits accomplis, and so much more real than her recent naked dip. Ever after she struck him as an uncannily complete person for all her five feet and her eighty-nine pounds, perhaps because her size was perfectly, almost numerically, proportioned (although he never paired her with any one number) and her face, molded with the over-full cheeks and strong lines of an actress, seemed to have been sculpted for the chic contours of a jockey helmet. From the beginning they were friends. He had stared in admiration at her departing figure, so completely a part of the animal, before limping back to work. Even that early he knew he had to love her and somehow he would be safe with her. She would protect his privacy. Cherishing this above all else, he clung to her, and she had been pleased with him, although he had also seen, as soon as she mounted the horse, she would never quite be his.

And yet that morning she seemed to be his, when she opened the door of her Georgetown apartment, and with the sun splashing through the French doors behind, she stood smiling in a brief pink terri-cloth robe and nibbling an English muffin. But when he bent to kiss her, her fingers met his lips.

"Not till you tell me who Mr. Jane is and why he keeps calling you here and leaving messages."

"It must be annoying. I'll try to have it stopped."

"But who is he, Tobe? Is he some kind of fag you're trying to avoid? I fell in love with a fag once and if you turn out to be one, I'll kill you."

"Promises, promises." He saw her smartly heeling into her horses flanks.

"Oh, stop."

"Would you like a display of my innocence?" He kissed her buttery mouth.

"That's a new word for it."

"I'm only offering to help."

"You might try being a little less attractive."

"We're all a little queer, Monte. But I'm not an 'attractive' man, and this isn't what you think it is."

"Then tell me who he is."

"Can't."

"Fag!" He kissed her. "Now I'm sure of it." She pushed away. "You kiss just like whatshisname in the movies. George Saunders."

"He's just some spook I picked up as a rider on my last security clearance."

"You walk the streets at night, and men pick you up because they feel sorry for you---"

"Monte!"

"Oh, skip that. Sorry."

"Why be jealous?" She let him hold her, finally offered her mouth to him, and ringed her arms tight around his waist. "It's not worth it."

"I love you, Tobe. You can have your faggot friends over anytime you like. Tell Mr. Jane I'm not a heterosexual bitch."

"Oh, you're not in the least."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Coffee."

"Well, have an egg with me."

"All right."

The message was on the white wrought-iron and glass table near his place. He scanned the number and pocketed it.

"When did you get in?" He called to her in the kitchenette.

"I don't know. Late. After two."

"And?"

"I showed. The track was about as fast as Macy's basement."

"What about the horse?"

"Nothing. We had nothing to say to each other. Strictly a business proposition. On that basis, I can't complain."

"I missed you."

"More than the other times?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Me too. Isn't that funny?"

She served him a brightly scrambled egg from her orange skillet. Her taste ran to Danish-modern, Japanese, and early American, forming quite a potpourri for Toby, who rented a house full of someone else's furniture.

"I had that funny dream again last night---the one I'm mar-

ried in and seperated from my family. The TV was on the blink, and I turned in early. Have you tried your radio today? All I could get on my car radio was a hum. I don't feel in touch." Monte switched on her kitchen radio. It hummed. "Yours too?"

"Some days it plays, some days it hums. Today it hums. There are days when I prefer the hum."

"Try your TV---do you mind?"

"Not at all---if I had one. I'm the chick without the TV, remember? Would a record help?"

"Immensely."

As she was easing the needle on an album by "The Court of Last Resort," the phone rang. She dashed into her bedroom to get it and came right out, looking quietly at him.

He took the call and returned in a few moments. "That settles that."

"It does?"

"About the TV. An engineers' union struck in New York. It spread across the country, and since none of the broadcasting personnel would violate the picket lines, the networks have shut down."

"Is that what your Mr. Jane does---keeps you informed on television walkouts?"

"Yes. He knows I work too late to keep up on the news, so he takes it upon himself to keep me informed." He laughed, then blurted out: "He's my informant."

"But, why does he call here?"

"Ask him next time."

The curiosity left her face.

"The last time he called, you suddenly found you had to leave."

"Go along with me awhile, Monte."

"You're into something---you're not my marvelous mathematician anymore---you're into something ugly."

Out on the street, he was still wincing at the word "ugly" and bumped into several people milling about on the sidewalk. Up and down the quiet, brick sidewalk people were walking, walking, walking. He'd never seen anything like that before. In his Pinto driving through the city he saw the same sight all around him. It was a crisp late March day still too cold to launch spring, but nonetheless something had turned out the populace like a Sunday in May, only more so---like all of May funneled into one morning. And everyone was looking around, up and down, behind, above, yet paying one another scant notice. It must be some holiday.

Parking off Fourteenth Street, he bought a Post, the last one on the rack, and skimmed over the headlines. The big one was Strike Widens. The government was staying out, expecting a settlement shortly. Further down, he read Russian Tanks Line Up Along Wall. That had been expected. The West had held off taking action against a new surge of Neo-Nazism in West Germany, but Russia wasn't taking any chances on its spreading to the East as indeed it seemed to be, although the Soviets continued to assure the West that it was only taking defensive precautions and staging manuvers. Opinion had at first been fiercely divided in the States over a Russian move into West Germany, especially after Prauge, but moderates and the New Left alike found it awkward to defend the freedom of Neo-Nazis, who indeed seemed bent on provoking a confrontation. There were also rumors of CIA involvement. But the great majority were not interested. "Let the Russians handle 'em," the man on the street was quoted as saying. "Better the Russians than us. Haven't we got enough to deal with already?" Jews, liberals, conservatives were all finding their ideals on the rack. Hippies were wearing brownshirts. Motorcycle gangs displayed the hammer-and-sickle.

On the lower left was an item on the release of a new government report on "National Goals." He began reading it, found it to be inconclusive.

"Up here, Toby!"

It was Jane's gravel voice calling from the lawn below the Washington Monument. He had a wide balloon tray hanging on his wide stomach and was red from blowing up balloons for a crowd of clamoring children.

"Give me a hand here, will you? We're doing an unusually brisk business today."

Toby began blowing balloons.

"God, you're a god-send. How's it going, boy?"

"Monte doesn't like her number being used."

"Why, the little bitch. Where's her patriotism?"

"She doesn't have any. She's a jockey."

"You tell her anything?"

"No."

"Good. Don't. Hold on, you little twerp---not til you give me your dime. Take it." He talked between blows. "A jockey, eh? How does she take it---side-saddle or straight up?" His raucous laughter barked out. Broad and blond and vulgar, he lord-ed over the other's slight physique and tortoise-shell eyes.

"Is that what you wanted to see me about?" He half turned.

"Who are you having dinner with tonight, Toby-boy?"

"Two friends of mine---scientists." He dropped the remaining balloons back into the tray. "Friends."

"What's your connection with them outside of friendship?"

"None, now. We worked together on a project several years ago. I on the mathematical end, they on the nuclear physics end. We became friends in the process."

"Government contract?"

"Of course."

"What do they want with you now, Toby-boy?"

"Actually, it was my idea. I dislike eating alone. I had not expected Monte back so soon. And, as I said, we are friends."

"Okay, Toby-boy." His teeth were jagged behind his wide smile. His biggish, soft-looking build, his broad, grainy features and his ragged blond lamb-chops made him ferocious and effete at the same time. He'd once been an actor, Toby heard.

"You'll be hearing from me." He made his grin sinister.

"Where?"

"Leave that little jockey bitch to me---I'll make her ride right yet. Have a balloon."

"Never use 'em." And he strode off, bobbing and dipping down the bank to Jane's gruff laughter.

Toby and his two friends decided to leave the crowded city, and so they drove fifteen miles south on Route One to a German restaurant, patronized prinicipally by army career families and seedy descendents of the Virginia gentry. There were three semi-private rooms cluttered with centuries of peasent bric-a-brac, bourgois souveniers, and military artifacts, including a battle-worn swastika. It was a rather ominous setting in view of the rising New Germany. However, the fare was very fine and you were left alone.

"You could bug this place, and it would take ten years to clean it out," Yorik was telling Trillig.

"YOU can bug an empty room and it could never be cleaned out short of a wrecking ball," Trillig answered. Some officers entered and sat at the other end of the room. One of them got up and excused himself.

"But it should be so much more FUN here, you see."

"That's your idea of fun?"

"You take your kicks where you can these days."

"I was having a little fun with my kids," Trillig said, "just slipping a small bug in their room, you know, to close the communications gap, and you wouldn't guess what I found."

"A bug." Yorik made a poker face reply.

"Hey, that's right. They had one running into our bedroom. So we converted it into a two-way intercomm."

"It certainly is heartening to learn that at least one family in America actually LISTENS to its children," Yorik grinned.

"Go ahead and laugh, but I really don't think that criticism---'Nobody listens anymore'---is valid."

"No?"

"For example: the FBI listens, doesn't it? The FBI listens to almost everybody. And the CIA, and Army Counter-Intelligence---they're not exactly deaf, you know."

"Touche, Trillig." His fair forehead turned cloudy. "Its always reassuring to find that a few people still care."

They burst into nervous laughter. Two members of the party of officers glanced around. The waitress came up and the officers ordered steins of Bock Beer and various wursts. Yorik was tall, square-shouldered, his wavy brown hair and beard greying into middle years. His shoes were size twelve. Trillig, his colleague, was slightly stooped, a size seven weasel of a man, with straight black hair and keen narrow eyes that seemed fitted to the top of a microscope. He always brought with him strange odors. Tonight it was sulfur and acridine. They both had wienerschitzels. Toby, an undeclared vegetarian, satisfied himself with an omlet.

Over coffee, they turned to their friend. Yorik spoke.

"Toby, I suspect you kept records on that project we worked on together a while back?"

"You mean the nuclear detonating de---"

"Yes, THAT one," Trillig's voice sank to a whisper.

Yorik's eyes circled round. A party of civilian men all in their late thirties and wearing dark business suits entered the room and found a corner booth. Yorik's voice dropped as he bent forward.

"The fact is, Toby, we wanted to ask you if we could take a look at them sometime---refresh our memories on a few things."

"We've---uh---misplaced our own work," Trillig added.

"But how can that be? The project's operative." The other two held back. Toby went on. "I don't follow this---unless, unless---no, I'm frankly confused, fellas. You're having a little joke on me?"

"No!" They meant it.

"Well, I can't imagine why you want my file---unless you two have found a bug---"

"There."

"That's it."

"Well, for God's sakes, fill me in. Who made it? Did I?"

"Yes."

"No. That is---"

"Well, I'll run my figures through the computer again for you and let you know---"

Yorik glanced at the table of officers that was now being served. "I'm afraid there isn't time for that," Trillig said.

"Gentlemen," said Yorik, "I'm afraid there isn't even time for Toby to get the files for us. He's got to destroy them himself. Tonight. As soon as we finish up here."

"Now THAT I simply will not do," Toby reared back angrily. "Frankly, fellas, if there's anything fishy in this, I may as well tell you, I'll go straight to the brass."

"That's scarcely necessary, Toby." Yorik glanced at Trillig. "We've got to tell him and risk it." Trillig's eyes lowered.

"Look, Toby, Trillig and I have done a really Godawful, terrible thing." He suddenly had to laugh and couldn't stop.

"You'll never believe it Toby, honest to God," and Trillig's muffled laugh coursed uncontrollably through his features.

Suddenly Yorik's face was rigid. He whispered hoarsely to Toby: "We've cut the balls off the big one." Trillig nodded firmly. "Castrated the son of a bitch, by God."

And then they were at it again. Toby could only suppose it was some collossal sick joke he was about to be let in on. But at the pit of his stomach flickered a dim, dreadful warning device.

Yorik had gone over to the officers' table to borrow a sugar bowl. The beet-red flush of a moment ago had passed when he returned. He had sobered himself. Trillig wiped his face with a handkerchief. His head shook and his face seemed to writhe in the process.

"Time is running out." Yorik tilted a hasty gush of sugar into his coffee. "We've got to be fast. Remember, Toby, an international conference for atomic scientists in Santa Barbara about ten years ago? Or maybe you don't, you were still in college."

"I remember it."

"Okay, well, Trillig and I attended---" he drove back a demonic laugh, "---and we met a lot of fine people, other scientists, some from behind the iron curtain. Russia of course boycotted. We sunbathed and drank a lot together. We got to see how much we had in common. The atmosphere was exhilarating. Trillig and I went home and studied Russian, and the following spring we were invited to an international convocation of scientists in Stockholm. After the formal conference ended, we stayed on together for a few days with the Russians, French, and Chinese we had met. We formed a sort of bond of understanding."

"Blutbruderschaft," Trillig interjected.

"Call it anything you want---let's not forget the ladies."

"Anyway, we compared notes. We figured that within the next year there would be a nuclear weapons stockpile in the U.S. of sufficient magnitude to wage all of World War II on a DAILY basis for 53,000 days, or 136 years. And our friends from the Soviet Union arrived at a similar estimate. It was obviously only a matter of time before other countries would catch up."

"We were the ones primarily responsible for the production of all this crazy power, and yet our work had been completely taken out of our hands. We were mere lackeys---"

"Flunkies to a bunch of chump politicians!"

"It was unbearable. We had a farewell party in our suite and drank champagne through the night. By dawn we had all pretty well agreed. We had to act."

"The idea, you see," Trillig could not contain himself, "was that each of us would return to our countries and devise some mechanism for rendering our respective governments' nuclear arsenals inoperative. All of it, if possible. We recognized that we had to trust one another absolutely---that we could never risk sharing our respective plans, that we had to in fact forego all communication and further contact entirely. Of course we also knew that if anyone of us played Judas, the whole scheme would collapse. Those were strange times. We were fluctuating between exhilaration and despair, bonded only by our common purpose. The Russians we had met were beautiful. They kissed us and wept when we left---"

"To this day we have not heard so much as a word on this scheme," Yorik added. "But Trillig and I upheld our part of the bargain."

"We've fought the fight, Toby."

"Pulled the plug on the big one."

"Deballed the sucker and all its beastly spawn."

"And you've helped, Toby."

The dread had mounted into Toby's throat, rattling his heart chambers as it welled up and formed into a nauseous image of Jane---eyes bugged out---blowing himself up into an enormous green balloon and floating up into the sky. He sighed, and knew that something was ending for him.

"Our first step was to plant a bug in the detonating device of the weapons that were being tested. When the bug showed up, with that mechanism being our speciality, naturally we were consulted. Following that, we were commissioned to draw up plans for redesign. Our task then turned into slipping in a bug that would not work in test but would in practice---should that dismal day ever come."

"We fooled around deep in the detonating electronics. We couldn't test out what would happen, so---"

"So you found a math man with a computer who could work out the variables and percentages on paper. But why ME?"

"Well, frankly, Toby, we thought if the moment of truth ever came, you'd join us."

"And to be fair we thought that would be less likely to occur with you---you act as if every problem is fitted to some solution, and keep at it until you find one. Once we hit you with a tough problem, we knew we had you."

"After we found what we needed to know, it was ridiculously easy. The blade is in there now where no one will ever find it. Its standard operating procedure, invisible in tests, but foolproof in practice."

"We trust."

"Well, at least tell me how you finally did it."

"Oh, no, Toby, we can't. You'd be as valuble to the government as we are."

"Its for your own sake---only burn those files---TONIGHT, Toby!"

"But I want to know the rest. Now that you've let me in this far---"

"You should be leaving, Toby. Our lives are in danger. Yours will be too if you stay. We've been followed for several weeks. We think one of our brother scientists has betrayed us. For our part we have sworn. We carry our own self-destructs."

"But what if all this is for nothing? What likelihood is there that nuclear weapons will ever be used?"

"At the time we were uncertain. We acted in the name of our own humanity. Don't laugh. We had no thought then of saving the world. We have no messianic complexes. However---"

"The world must be saved!" Trillig cried through his teeth. "On that point we are firm. What we have joined together we can also put asunder. The power has always been ours. Call us arrogant, mad, as you like. There is not a court in the world will exonerate us. We're beyond the pale. Legally, we're traitors. The higher law we pledge our allegiance to has yet to be written."

"We have firm evidence to believe," Yorik continued, "that there is much debate among our chiefs of staff and the State Department over the advisability of using tactical nuclear weapons if Russian tanks cross over the West German frontier in great strength. And since they are massed on the border now, it could happen in an instant. Then we would find out how well our knife can cut, and we would also find out quickly who our brothers are."

"In this context, the media shut-down is ominous indeed. And the radios you may have noticed are on a defense alert. They

say its just a test, but who knows? Some suspect the CIA. Some suspect Russian agents."

"The country is coming unglued."

"Why are the people staying away from work?" The two scientists shrugged at Toby's irrelevance.

"Maybe Armaggeddon has begun." Trillig winked.

"Look, Toby." Yorik's voice quavered with waning authority. "Do what you have to. We've made you one of us. But you must leave us now. We can't. We have further business to transact. You needn't worry about us finding a way back."

"Go!" Trillig hissed.

Toby pulled out some bills. Yorik's hand closed on his.

"This is our treat."

"Brother!" Trillig's dark eyes flashed under his weasel's brow as he clutched Toby's hand.

As he drove off, Toby saw in his rear view mirror a group of men coming out of the restaurant. They were the civilians in business suits. Among them were Yorik and Trillig. He wanted to drive straight to Monte's. She had gone to a film, but would be back home soon. He wavered. Yorik and Trillig had released something in him. How he hated that CIA bastard, Mr. Jane.

He couldn't go to Monte's; he had to get to his filing cabinet at home. Assimilating all the new data completely engaged his mind. When he neared his house he did not notice that it was lit up until he was right in front. He kept going, he didn't know why. On the third circle he pulled into his drive. It was his house and he was not a criminal despite the way he felt---which he wasn't very sure about, either. He opened the front door and stepped inside. The smell of dead cigarettes carried the absence of whoever had been there. No attempt had been made to cover the ransacking. He felt violated along with his rooms. Almost perfunctorily, he slid open his bedroom closet door. The filing cabinet had been pried open. Everything was intact and in order. Just the one folder on the project was missing. He fled the house.

To Monte's. It had to be somewhere. But he quickly forgot his destination as soon as his mind began processing the new data. In the span of a few hours a whirlpool had sucked him down. There had to be reasons, preliminary steps. He backed up in slow motion the film of his memory. X had blatantly disemboweled his files. It seemed to be less a criminal than a licensed act. If anything, it had made him feel criminal. Y had ordered X. Who was Y and how did Y know how to time it? At the restaurant they seemed to be watched by two groups of men. Earlier on, one of the officers had made a phone call. And then his friends had been arrested, or kidnapped. But if the events could be chained together, why all this at once?

He drove down Pennsylvania Avenue, past the White House, lit up---as always?---like a battleship. He parked below the Washington Monument, cadaverously pale and fish-like in the hazy light beams. Perhaps Yorik and Trillig had slipped a bug into his secret mechanisms, because he now began hobbling around the monument in a wide circle, glancing up at the obelisk from time to time, as if he could discern hieroglyphs decorating it, there to be interpreted, instead of the blank thing it was, and he brooded on until at last he decided that his file would be nearly worthless to another. Then he became enraged at the disemboweling of his cabinet and the theft of his papers---his numbers, his privacy.

Numbers bestowed on him the inner space he could not live without. He gazed at the 555 foot marble monolith again. The concentration of the country welled up in that stark edifice with its circling skirt of flags, the primal, public ONE, which said UP YOURS to the rest of the world and held sway over the country as if it had a serpent's eye roving from the Capitol Building to the White House, the Pentagon, and the other memorials and federal edifices, humped below in humble zero obeisiance to the one monstrous basilisk.

O say can you see---

What a monster, what a beast that priggish prick of a finger was. The Fourth of July fireworks should be launched from its tip, democracy's annual orgasm.

By the dawn's early light---

Turn into a molten fountain of fire for evryone to cower under. Vesuvius. No wonder his friends wanted to deball the bomb. The sheer solidity of the thing was maddening. I am the Lord thy God there shall be no other gods before me. I am Number One. Alone! His foot ached to kick into its brute, imperious majesty.

The bombs bursting in air---

Rockets exploding or flaring in their fall as they reach a certain acceleration per second per second...

He leaned back against its side, sweating, with closed eyes. His hatred had reached its apex and abated.

Gave proof through the night---

He had his answer.

Trillig and Yorik had merely buried a tiny accelerometer deep within the detonating device. During bomb-fall a certain acceleration would be reached and the accelerometer would activate a short circuit. It was mad, but if undetected, it might work. For an instant he outstretched the stone giant; he had unsprung.

Staring down the mall, his eyes gradually regained focus. The Capitol Building was all lit up. He'd never before seen such a sight. And he still didn't know why evryone was in such a hurry, or what he should do, if anything. He wanted Monte, but it was now after eleven. Could Congress be in extraordinary session---over the media strike? He'd heard earlier in the evening that the newsman's guild in sympathy with the strike had walked off their jobs. It was impossible to get word on what was going on.

Monte was up when he buzzed her apartment. The return buzz came immediately, and after letting him in, she returned to a half-filled glass of sherry by the sofa. She appeared to be waiting for him. He sat in a wicker-bucket affair opposite her. He didn't know what to say, but he was soon relieved of the burden when the bedroom door opened.

"Oh, Toby-boy." Mr. Jane strode in. "I expected you much sooner than this. Oh, you needn't get any ideas---I was merely using the phone. Your little jockey has been most considerate."

"You've been waiting?"

"Just to thank you for helping us out earlier this evening."

"In what way?"

"Why, in taking your friends to your favorite German restaurant and keeping them occupied till we were ready to make our move."

"But I was doing nothing of the sort. What have you done with them? You won't get them to talk."

"Should we? Why would we want to listen to them? We've got all we need to know." Inside, Jane looked less gross. He was wearing a sharkskin suit and had also slipped into his suave movie-spy-actor role.

"You know what they planned?"

"of course, Toby-boy. They were marked as potential defectors years ago. It was just a matter of waiting for the lunge---the right moment, y'know?"

"Defectors?"

"Would you two like to be alone?" Monte interrupted, but Jane held Toby spellbound.

"I'm sorry if this surprises you, Toby-boy. I was never sure whether or not you knew. But we didn't believe you would be foolhardy enough to let them take you in. However, just to be sure, just before the pinch we ran a security check on your place. I guess all the boys found were some figures left over from a joint project several years back. Here, you can have it back if you like." He pulled a manilla envelope from under his trench-coat draped across a dinette chair.

"Thank you. Are you sure you don't need it?"

"Don't let it worry you. Do try to be a little less cagey in the future, pal. It doesn't bring out our best manners."

"Excuse me." Monte went into the kitchen, began rinsing dishes in the sink.

"Are you an actor, Jane? Were you an actor once?"

"Is this a quid pro quo, pal?"

"I'd heard you were. I mean, you're so good you confuse me. You are CIA, aren't you? I took it for granted. I thought you just came with my government contracts, like travel vouchers What are you doing to Yorik and Trillig? Why should I believe you?"

"Read about it in the Post tomorrow."

"What Post?"

"Quite right. I'd forgotten."

"They planned to leave tonight?"

"That's right, Toby-boy. Flight from Dulles to Algiers. From there you can figure it out yourself."

"Do you know why they were leaving just at this time?"

"Aha, Toby-boy, now you're turning the screws too tight. Figure it out yourself. The international situation being what it is, who knows what they might have picked up in the way of contingency plans?"

"What plans?"

"We don't believe in leaving things to chance now, do we?"

The phone rang. Monte answered and beckoned to Jane.

"What plans, Monte? Do you know something I don't?"

"He means, doesn't he, whether were going to take any military steps to block Russia's invading Germany. That's what

Congress is debating now."

"Do you mean we're on the brink of something with Russia?"

"No one seems to know. The military is considering a protective reaction if Russia makes the first move or an anticipatory reaction if Russia doesn't withdrew her troops from the border. They're willing to use the missiles, if necessary. A real bang. At least, that's what I picked up off my radio---turned out it was working okay. The stations were observing silence because of the defense alert. Now that you see what a good source of information I can be, you can do without him."

Jane came out of the bedroom and dropped back into his chair. "I'm expecting another call here. I hope it isn't inconvenient. Shouldn't be long. May I have a drink? Don't bother, I'll find something."

He returned in a few moments and again slumped in his chair. "Well, friends, we may be in for it this time. I've just been told that three of our reconaissance planes were hit over the German border, but number four got back with pictures showing massive Russian troop movements. Its expected that Congress will vote the President a free hand.

"It was such a waste to sacrafice the recon planes. My God, we don't need any further recon and we don't need any further provocation. We saw it coming last week when when a Russian scientist defected to West Berlin. He was the one who dropped your friends' names enough times to put us on the lookout. So we've discarded two of our aces to pick up their joker."

He seemed to have closed the subject.

"What made him a joker?"

"Some far-out story he had about wanting us not to worry if Russia should use nuclear weapons."

The question then, Toby saw, was not over the joker, but who had the trump?

The phone rang again. This time Jane got up to answer. Monte turned on the radio, and after several moments, a bulletin was broadcast. The President, having been voted the right to initiate all necessary st--- in the defense of the country by Congress, was now consu with his Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Jane's look comi f the bedroom brought Toby to his feet. Jane frowned and . "Something's come up in the questioning of Yorik and Trillig. I have to bring you in. Its probably nothing, Toby-boy."

"Really?" Toby said, sipping his drink and eyeing Jane.

"Toby," said Monte, "I wish you'd get this phony fag dick out of here."

As he straightened from setting down his drink, Toby lifted a kick with all the wiry might of his 160 pounds, a kick that had been buried in his fish-foot since childhood, a bullet of a kick at so many feet per second per second that scored a field-goal deep in Jane's groin, lifting him straight up a good six inches off the floor and laying him down flat, where his face no sooner groaned into purple than a brass candlestick from Denmark clutched in Toby's hand crashed into the side of his head, cooling out his actor's chameleon features.

Toby stood up, heaving.

"I must've been wanting to do that for a long time."

He sat down. The violence had reawakened in him the dream of his boy's land-mine shattered foot. He strained to recall the rest.

"Is he dead?" Monte was crying over him. "Oh, what if you've killed him?"

Toby brought himself to kneel beside her. The man's face was fish-belly pale. But he was breathing and not bleeding.

On an impulse borrowed from cold-war spy movies, Toby searched through Jane's pockets til he found a wallet and a pearl-handled mini-revolver.

"Give me a hand with him, Monte." He was struggling to get underneath the limp, bulky body. Monte pulled up a shoulder.

"Get the door." He heaved under Jane. As Monte got the door open, the phone rang. They stopped. It would be for Jane.

"You'd better answer it, Monte. Tell them that Jane and I left together twenty minutes ago and that's all you know." He stumbled out the door and managed to get Jane to the street.

"What happened?" he asked Monte when he returned.

"I said hello and got a click. What took you so long?"

"I had to find a pay phone to get an ambulance for Jane."

"But won't he send someone right back here?"

"He isn't capable of doing anything for several hours and I doubt that he would anyway if we were to force things out in the open. I found a private detective's card in his wallet. That would be his cover. He's small fry, anyway."

The phone rang. Toby nodded, and followed her into the bedroom.

"Hello...No, he left about a half hour ago...Yes, they left together." Click. And Monte replaced the receiver. Toby held her.

"Oh, baby, baby, if you only knew---"

"You could tell me." He was kissing her, sitting her down on the bed. "Like right now." She was back on her feet. "I want to get away from here. Let's go. I don't care where."

They left and walked along Wisconsin Avenue until they found a bar open. He told her what he knew.

"You're awfully cool about this, Toby, don't you think we should do something?"

"What?"

"Like tell somebody."

"Yes, there's always someone else to tell. Let's go for a walk." His foot was throbbing bad.

They walked til they found an open coffee house. Neither could refrain from talking. They brought out their whole buried lives, spread out all their fears, secret wounds, furtive needs, everything they could lay hands on as if they had forgotten the means of withholding, evading, deflecting and dodging that had previously served them. They spoke to and over and into each other as if they might be interpreted and their words puncuated for them. He had been trying to work out some impossible equation on her slight body; she had always felt him beneath her. He had been redesigning her to unacknowledged specifications; she had listened to a drumming beat over his voice. Now they sat and listened and heard. There were tears, recoils, sighs, aversions. More coffee was ordered. And more searingly private things broke in on them. In his soul she was no woman; likewise in hers he was no man. He had only been rendering proof; she, refraining.

Silently they were clutching hands when the coffee house closed down, and silently they walked along the empty sidewalks of M street to Pennsylvania Avenue. The sun was breaking out like radiation burns across the ragged sky in front of them when they straggled over the lawn of the Washington Monument. They huddled on a bench until a young black man in a blue uniform strode up, unlocked the door, and opened the elevator that would bear them up to the 500 foot observation room where they could watch through deep windows and wait. What better place to go from, if you had to go, and if not---"

When the air-raid sirens screamed through the city and into their ears at 8:30, they hid on the stairs until the elevator returned, and then occupied posts at the windows when it dropped. The city was serene below, clean of people and traffic. As soon as the sirens ceased, it was deathly still. Toby tried to imagine what would happen or what might be happening in the skies over the Atlantic. Our defensive missiles would intercept their rockets, the ones sent up to intercept our interceptors, and for a while, even if they were duds, it would be like trading jumps on a checkerboard until the last few pieces would break through to be crowned.

At first it was a faint whistling they heard, a woman slipping out of her nylons, or leaves rustling in an afternoon breeze. A family of Russian rockets were arriving, but abruptly the whistling stopped. Could they have dropped short into the Bay? Whatever it was, the sequence repeated itself several times. Once the whistling continued and they heard it briefly extinguish behind them.

They were too terrified to stand seperately. She dug herself into him. He, at first enclosing her, fell over her as her legs doubled under. He lay on her and could not move. They virtually stopped breathing as a hoarse whisper rose to a roaring, screaming crescendo, boring in on them until its impact shook the tower. She moaned under him. At first he had felt a current of pleasure, but he was limp and lifeless on her, and barely heard her tiny whimpering, faintly weeping sounds.

"You terrify me," he whispered.

"You're destroying me," she cried.

No more whistles came. After a while he picked himself up and pulled Monte beside him. They stumbled down the stairs, their legs turned to weak rubber by the time they disgorged and tripped down the lawn to the spot where a Soviet rocket had gouged waist deep into the earth. They stared at the dud. The eunich.

On the superstition that lightening never strikes twice in the same place, they sat nearby. A faint vestige of impulse urged Toby to kneel, but he resisted. His eyes were turned inward, he had come to the end of his dream. The word that he had sought was on his tongue, and he tasted it in all the welling-up blind-terror of the past moments: Neutralization.

The sirens were sounding again, another signal. Soon a Park Department official arrived leading a dump truck. He directed some laborers installing a white picket fence around the rocket. Photographers converged. No one paid attention to Toby and Monte crying on the grass. Soon other people began walking up. The same crowds that he had noticed the day before were gathering.

Monte brought her face out of the grass and was wiping her tears from her cheeks. Toby guided them through the massing crowds. The crowds had the drugged-look of the uprooted on their faces. He overheard their anxious voices. Who had buried the rocket there? Was it over? What happened? Whose side won? Many were still complaining about the TV being off, swearing and vowing not to go back to their jobs unless they had operative TV's to return home to.

"How would you like your eggs?" Monte suddenly broke in.

"Any way?"

"Any way."

"In bed?"

As they turned into Seventeenth Street, a black Continental pulled up next to them. A back-seat window droned down, and a wavy brown head stretched out.

"Hello there, Toby." The couple strode over to where the limosine sat idling and peered in. Along with two colonels and a general in the wide back seat sat Yorik and Trillig. The interior was acrid with cigar smoke. Toby introduced Monte.

"I can't say how relieved I am to see you're all right. You are, aren't you?"

"Oh, absolutely. Right, gentlemen? We've just been clearing up a little misunderstanding. Can you believe it? They thought we were defecting, and all we planned was a little vacation in North Africa."

"Well, I hope you set them right on your patriotism."

"We certainly did." Trillig beamed. He and a colonel had rocket-sized stogies.

"Gorgeous day, isn't it? We saw jonquils driving in from the whadyecallit?" Yorik turned to the colonel next to him. "Oh, yes, the Puzzle Palace. Trillig's a nut about flowers. He made us stop and get out." He gestured to his friends lap of dafodils.

"I wish we could stay and chat, but we're told we have an appointment up ahead. Some trouble seems to have arisen overnight with our weapons' systems. Damnedest thing I ever heard. Can't say more now; you know the rules. But we may need to consult with you later on---just possibly might throw a little business your way."

"Not on your life!" Toby shouted, but the automatic window had already droned up. Toby and Monte watched the limosine slither off and turn right two blocks further up into Executive Avenue toward the White House.

The story "The Killing Zone" was adapted for this magazine by the editor. Much thanks to Chipper for allowing us to use his story.

Anyone knowing the whereabouts of Lex Morris, please contact me at this magazine's address.

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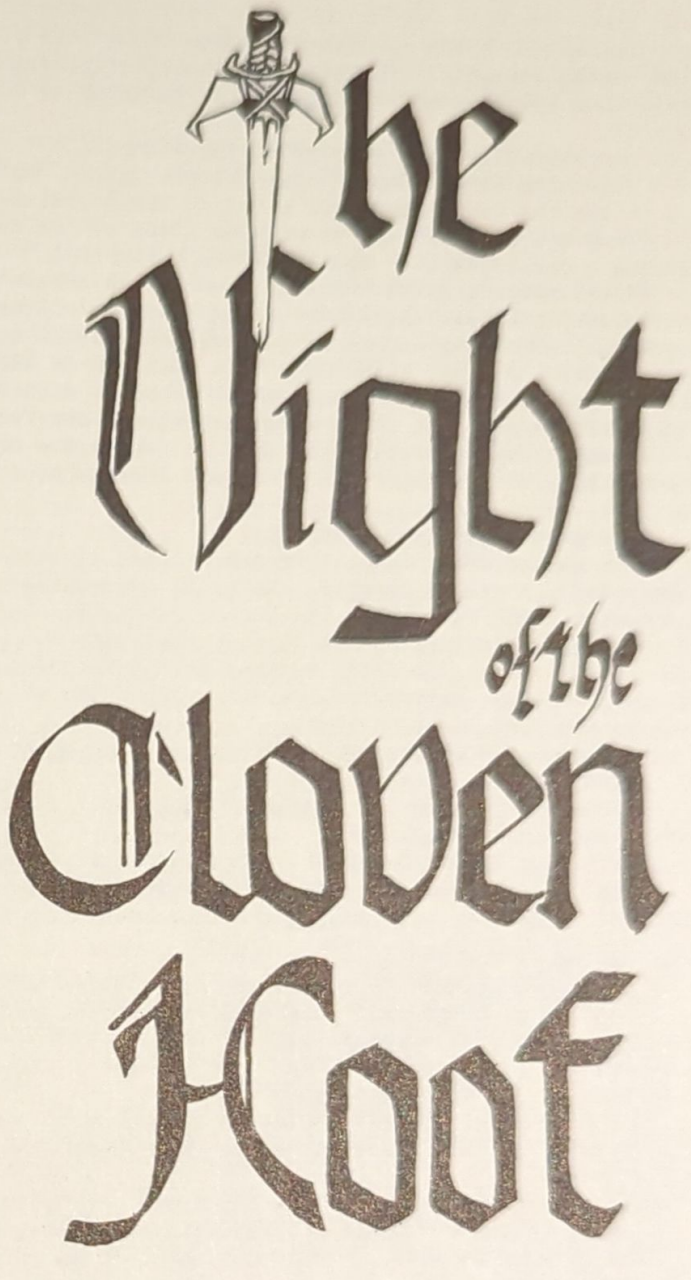


by Gerard Houarner. Illustrations by Jill Gardner.

"And a Darkness of Old did
arise from the lands of the
Southmen, and threatened to
banish the Light of the New
World..."
---The Book of Elden.

The cool night settled calmly over the great Mount of Starkhorn as a pair of riders made their way down its weathered slopes and onto the road to Elden. The moon, a mantle of stars shimmering about its paled shoulders, watched their progress with serene aloofness. Small creatures of darkness scurried away from their path, and the chill night breeze whispered softly of life and death to those whose ears were sensitive to such things.

Touchstone cocked his head upwards to return the moon's steady gaze while listening to the far-off howling of the mountain wolves.

"Our brothers speak of evil things this night," he said to Silverwraith, who rode a glistening, white-tipped stallion.

"Yes, the breeze carries the scent of danger. I do not like this night's outing, Touchstone."

"Yet we are bound by greater powers to aid the Elden-folk in the coming struggle," replied Touchstone, returning his gaze to earth and spurring his black mare on to catch up with Silverwraith.

"Our allies are the victims of the Clans..."

"...of the Cloven Hoof," spat Silverwraith. "One never needs to ask who is the cause of grief in these southern lands."

"They are our enemies, as well as Elden's. We shall be rendering a double service against those barbarians."

Silverwraith grunted and pulled his thick russet cape closer around his slim shoulders. Long bands of silver hair escaped the comforting warmth of the cape and flowed out into the night air. A long, slim sword in a scabbard of eldritch-metal and jade jutted out from beneath the cape, a grim warning to would-be robbers that these were no ordinary way-farers.

Another long, piercing wail drifted across the countryside and was answered. A slight smile crossed Touchstone's bearded lips.

"Moonbane comes," he whispered.

From out of the shadows, beneath a dense cluster of trees to their left, a figure emerged. Like the two approaching men, he wore fine chain mail and a thick cape over all. Keen yellow eyes shone fiercely from a dark face, marked with the scars of death-filled nights. Moonbane watched as Touchstone and Silverwraith walked their horses towards him. The three stood in a circle on the edge of the forest.

"Greetings, Brothers of the Fire," rumbled Moonbane in a deep, guttural voice.

"Greetings, Moonbane," returned Touchstone. The hour of confrontation approaches."

"So I have heard, Brothers. The Clans are rising?"

"Yes. The Lore-master of Elden has sent word to the Starkhorn. The Clans are raiding the countryside around Elden and he has asked the Brothers for aid."

"So we go," sighed Moonbane, his eyes filled with regret.

"Rest easy, Moonbane," laughed Silverwraith, though he too felt the pangs of freedom lost. "Soon we shall be rid of the threat the Clans now pose, and then you and I shall have the freedom of the night once more."

Moonbane scowled; then looked to Touchstone's luminescent yellow eyes. "I shall travel in my own way, Touchstone. Where shall we meet?"

"Under the Stone of Thunder, at the South Gate of Elden."

"I will be there. Swift and safe travel to you, Brothers."

"And to you, Moonbane," replied Touchstone as he urged his mount forward.

Moonbane watched the two ride off; one tall, thin and silver haired, the other shorter, of stocky build, with a black beard covering his face and wild locks escaping from a black and gold battle-helm. Once they were out of sight, Moonbane turned and melted into the trees.

The wolves howled to each other late into the night.

*****

The Lore-Master of Elden stood before the South Gate, accompanied by a troop of bronze-armored soldiers and the leading citizens of the city. High above them, atop the sloping walls of the city, more soldiers cast a wary eye out for the many dangers which lurked beneath the semi-light of the moon.

A fire blazed before the great gates of wood and iron. The Thunder Stone, embedded above the gate in ages-old rock, gleamed with subdued brilliance as star and flame light reflected off endless jewel-like facets. An ancient gem of unknown value and tremendous size, shrouded in legends of gods and sorcery. The Thunder Stone stared enigmatically to the South.

The citizens and soldiers at the gate began to approach the fire as the increasingly chill winds came off Ranegan's Bay and struck against the walls of the city. The fire had other purposes, decreed by the ancient scrolls in the library of Elden. These were old and dark purpor , based upon wisdom learned long before the founding of Elden, and no one spoke of them in the light of the moon.

The people of Elden were frightened. The shadow of Death had fallen over their city, their lands, and their existence. Death, in the form of red-garbed zealots from the Far South, had already twice crossed the Lainrod River to raid outlying villages. These madmen left nothing in their wake, save ashes and the mutilated bodies of the dead. And soon they would strike at Elden, the ancient pirate-city that was now a sanctuary of knowledge.

The leading citizens of the city had sought an answer to their dilemma, and they found it in the person of the Lore-Master of Elden, the wisest of wise men and mediator of conflicts. He could give them but one answer: the Brothers of the Fire.

"Here they come," screamed an old hag who stood with the soldiers atop the wall. The city dwellers turned and looked.

Out of the north they rode, rounding a bend in the road to arrive at the southern gate of the city. Two men, whose eyes shone like the brightest of moons, appeared on galloping horses. They rode swiftly and silently, like the light of the stars crossing the Void. They were men of subtle words and skillful arts, men who could handle swords with quickness and dexterity, men who were equally at home with the mysterious forces of high sorcery. They were two from the Brotherhood of the Fire, the New Men of Earth.

"Welcome, welcome, my friends," cried the Lore-Master of Elden as Touchstone and Silverwraith pulled to a stop before the bonfire.

"We come in aid of friends," replied Touchstone as he dismounted. The Lore-Master stepped up to Touchstone and caught his forearms in the grip of friendship. As Touchstone returned the gesture, the Lore-Master winced at the pressure.

"You carry your powers well, Touchstone. Curse me if I still couldn't take you for some hot-blooded youth."

"His blood is hot enough, though youth he may no longer be," grinned Silverwraith from his saddle.

Touchstone laughed. "My appearance adds to my strength, as you both well know. Many are the fools that thought I was an easy mark, and now they all lie buried in the Mother Soil."

"So they say. The Brothers of the Fire are known for their great powers. It is why I have sent for you. The Clans have..."

"We know. We await one other of our members before we can do what must be done."

Silverwraith pointed to the woods which seperated the Western Wall of Elden from the shores of Ranegan's Bay. Dark shapes flitted beneath the low branches, keeping to the shadows. The sound of a wolf call filled the air.

"Fear not, Lore-Master," whispered Touchstone, "this is the sign of our third comrade. He will arrive shortly."

An eerie scream broke the stillness of the night, followed by deep-throated growls and howls of pain. A figure staggered out of the shadows followed by several mounted, red-robed men.

In an instant, Silverwraith had spurred his steed forward and whipped his sword from its scabbard. The running figure stopped as he saw Silverwraith approaching and turned on his pursuers. Together they met the five riders of the Clan.

Blood ran quickly as Silverwraith, charging full speed into their midst, slipped below a Clansmen's wild swing and ran him through the throat. A murmur of awe and shock rippled through the frozen spectators on the walls of Elden as the fig-

ure on foot changed before their eyes from a man of middle heighth with great chords of muscle rippling beneath torn jerkin and mailed tunic, to a huge, ungainly craeture, not unlike a wolf in human garments.

The Clansmen milled about in confusion as this creature leapt among them, clawing at their horses and legs. Silverwraith engaged two horsemen, quickly felling one with strokes to the head, chest, and legs, in rapid succesion. The other circled and struck Silverwraith from behind, across the shoulders. Blood trickled from where the chain mail split at the force of the blow.

Silverwraith whirled about in his saddle, his teeth clenched in a grin of death, the Fire in his eyes leaping into the air. As the Clansman approached for another run, Silverwraith hurled himself from his saddle and caught the Clansman around the waist. They tumbled to the ground, the silver of their swords and Silverwraith's hair marked against the Clansman's billowing red robes. But the red robe soon took on a darker shade of red as Silverwraith found his target, and that struggle ended.

Meanwhile, a Clansman's horse had reared up in panic when the wolf creature had clawed at its sides. The rider was tossed to the ground, where he met his death at the claws and fangs of the creature.

As it rose from the slaughtered body, a Clansman galloped by and slashed it across the chest. The wound was deep, but the creature remained standing and turned to face the Clansman's next pass. Once again the horse panicked, but its rider fought for control as the wolf-being's claws raked the animal's sides. The Clansman's scimitar rose and fell against the full moon, but still the creature fought. It succeeded in dragging the rider down, and as it closed with the Clansman for a death struggle, the red-robed barbarian saw the fading yellow light of its eyes and knew that both he and the creature were dead.

The soldiers from the city reached the scene in time to see the inhuman creature resume its human shape. Silverwraith slowly rose, cleansed his sword on the on the fallen Clansman's crimson robe, and went over to where Moonbane lay, next to the raider he had taken down.

Moonbane gasped for air and his left arm was almost severed from his body. Blood ran freely forth into the earth from a dozen deep wounds. Moonbane turned and looked up at the figure of Silverwraith.

"The Clans..." he whispered hoarsely, "have summoned a demon..."

"Do not struggle, Brother. Take the passage to the gods in peace."

"No...was ambushed...it killed many dog-brothers...the Clans...they are here for Elden."

"The Clans have led a demon here? Moonbane, you must..."

"The mark," cried the dying Brother, "it leaves the mark...of the cloven...hoof..."

A slight tremor ran across Silverwraith's shoulders as he straightened and stared into the shadows beneath the trees. So the Clans were using high sorcery now. They had summoned a demon. And not just any demon...the Clans of the Cloven Hoof had summoned their god to fight at their side. Silverwraith looked down at Moonbane, and he saw the yellow light of the Fire fade from his eyes, leaving the empty sockets to stare off into Eternity.

"May the gods see fit to grant you swift and safe passage to the hall of lords, Brother Moonbane. You have earned your final freedom...and I shall gain my vengence."

Silverwraith surveyed the lands around him as the Elden soldiers gathered up the stray horses and dragged the scattered bodies off towards the city. The South Wall loomed to his left and, opposite the walls, the Frost Tip Forest spread south to the Lair-rod River and curved west behind him, seperating the Western Wall of Elden from the shores of Ranegan's Bay.

A great gust of wind suddenly swept across the fields between the woods and the Wall. A soldier screamed, and Silverwraith turned to see Moonbane's broken body clumsily slide off a horse and stagger off towards the South Gate. The air seemed to be charged with powerful, unseen energies. Silverwraith looked to the South Wall and there saw Touchstone and the Lore-Master standing alone on the ramparts above the gate.

"Come to me, my Brothers," cried Touchstone, in a booming voice which filled the air and made the ground tremble. "The powers have been summoned, it is for us to harness them."

Silverwraith sprang to his mount and rode to the gate, stopping only to pick up Moonbane's reanimated corpse. The palms of his hands grew moist against the leather reigns as Silverwraith felt the cold touch of Moonbane. The ways of the gods are strange indeed, he thought.

The gates closed as Silverwraith, followed by a few straggling soldiers, rode into the city. As the gates were locked, a new sound filled the air, drowning out the echoes of Touchstone's voice. It throbbed with the power of ten thousand souls as it rose from the forests surrounding Elden and hovered over its battlements. It was the signal of the Clans of the Cloven Hoof, the high-pitched call to bolster their courage and intimidate their enemies.

Yet now the three Brothers of the Fire stood upon the Southern Wall of Elden, and their voices could be heard even above the din of the Clans.

They cried out in unison: "Come to us, Demon of the Cloven Hoof. Come and meet the Masters you challenge."

A thunderous bellow of rage issued from deep in the woods facing the South Gate, and there came the sound of thrashing branches and heavy footsteps. A giant figure emerged from the shadows and stepped out into the light of the full moon.

All save the Lore-Master and the three Brothers were repulsed at the grotesque creature of evil. It stood almost as tall as a great oak, and its long, muscular arms, ending in six taloned hands, could reach far above the tallest tree. Indeed, with one prodigious leap, it may have cleared the walls of Elden and conquered the city on its own. A stench of bile and sulfur clung to its hairy hide and its slanted eyes shone crimson red. Clansmen crept out of the woods and stood anxiously behind the creature, some even daring to creep between its two powerful legs to wave their spears and scimitars at the defenders on the wall. The demon spoke over the chanting of its followers:

"Who be the mortals that challenge the Demon of the Hoof?"

"We, the Brothers of the Fire, who know your true name and the Higher Lords you serve," returned Touchstone. He spoke in a sing-song voice that was no longer entirely his.

"So these are the mysterious brothers who serve the Elemental Lords," laughed the Demon. "You claim to know my name and Masters? Then know you that I am L'ai-Skil Kragus. I serve no higher lords, for I am the Lord of Hate, the Master Lord of Emotion."

The Lore-Master of Elden threw a questioning glance at Touchstone, but the Brother merely smiled and continued speaking to the Demon. "So you now boast, Lord of Hate, though after our confrontation on the Battlemoors you did beg us for mercy. Your presence here on this plane of earth has not gone unnoticed by the Elemental Lords. Have you forgotten the Pact you made with them, L'ai-Skil Kragus? The Pact you made after the Elemental Lords shattered the alliance between the Lords of Emotion and upstart Lords of Technology and drove them from the land of mortals? What is meant by your presence here, when the Pact declared that you nevermore should roam the earth?"

The Demon screamed in rage and fear, his great hooves pounding the ground beneath him. His eyes blazed red and his words shook the foundations of the walls of Elden.

"What manner of mortals are you? What knowledge have you stolen from the archives of Elden? Who would dare to challenge my power?"

"We would dare, Master of the Lords of Emotion. We, the Elemental Lords."

And with those words, the Thunder Stone suddenly burst into life. It blazed with the eerie glow of moonfire, the same moonfire which shone from the eyes of Touchstone, Silverwraith, and Moonbane. They were no longer Brothers of the Fire, mere mortals allied with the Elemental Lords. They were now in communion with their Lords: the Master Elemental Irion within Touchstone, the Sea Lord Quin- Gaelus at one with Silverwraith, and Morn-Sing, the Moonwind Lord, who had detained the spirit of Moonbane for this purpose.

The Demon of the Cloven Hoof screamed in agony as the Thunder Stone's light grew ever stronger, penetrating and illuminating the Lord of Hate's cunning mind and fetid soul. But the Demon strove against the light, mouthing words which made the very air crackle with power. Shadowy forms, shapeless creatures of the night, descended from the Void at the Demon's command and flung themselves against the Thunder Stone. The light wavered and dimmed, and the Clansmen advanced behind their master. Elden soldiers streamed from hidden portals in the walls and met the advancing Clansmen. Soon the sounds of clashing steel and dying men rivalled the sounds of the Lords in combat.

Moonbane left the side of his comrades and joined the milling masses of warriors below. As the two other Brothers and their patron Lords fed the Thunder Stone with power, the body of Moonbane hacked and sliced its its way to the towering Demon, ignoring wounds that would have felled the greatest of mortal heroes. Such was the power of Moonbane, in his new state, that a mere glance into the fire-pits of his eyes would cause a warrior to fall where he stood. Like a basilisk dragon of death, Moonbane advanced on the Lord of Hate.

The Demon had halted its advance by the time Moonbane had reached it. The Lord of Hate was deep in conflict, summoning all its resources to break the Elemental Lords. The Demon was too

lost in the struggle to channel its tremendous powers to notice the bedraggled body of Moonbane, cut and hacked beyond recognition, stagger between its two immobile hooves and raise a sword which had begun to hum and sing with elemental energies.

The Power of the Elementals flowed into that sword, causing it to sing of the winds and the seas. The blade danced in Moonbane's hands, gathering the power which the Thunder Stone focused until at last it went screaming into the hairy loins of the evil Demon.

The power coursed through the Demon's inhuman veins like a deadly poison until it reached the brain. Warriors froze in midstroke at the sound of the Lord of Hate's cry of pain, and the shadow creatures from the Void ceased their attack upon the Thunder Stone. In that one moment of weakness, the power of the Lord of Hate was once again broken.

As the last echoes of the demon's cry of agony died out, the Thunder Stone burst into a brilliant radiance. Not even the shadow shapes could dim its renewed energy, and they fled back into the darkest depths of the Void. The Clansmen wavered, then retreated back to the edge of the forest, desperate to flee from the unbearable light, but unwilling to abandon their Master. The Elden warriors withdrew to the city walls and waited for the moment to drive the Clans away in utter rout. The light, though painful to their eyes, did not strike fear and panic into the minds of the Elden soldiers as it did to the Clansmen.

Meanwhile, the Demon L'ai-Skil Kragus writhed in agony on the field before the South Gate of Elden, braving the light and the poison in its veins to look upon its enemies and curse them.

"You! You shall rue this day before long, Irion. When next we meet, it shall be on my own terms, and then we shall see who is the Highest of the Lords."

And with those words, the Master Lord of Emotions that was the Demon of the Cloven Hoof waved its arms through the air, makthe Runes of Departure and thus breaking the summoning spell of the Clansmen. Upon seeing their Master fade from sight, the Clansmen broke and fled through the woods, pursued by the victory crazed soldiers of Elden.

*****

The chilling breeze still came off Ranegan's Bay, blowing away the stench of evil which filled the air. The fierce moonfire lights faded from the eyes of Touchstone and Silverwraith, returning them to their paler luminescent yellow...a token sign of the power granted to the Brothers of the Fire by the Elemental Lords. A pre-dawn calm settled over Elden and the fields surroun-ding it as warriors came down from the walls to stack and burn the bodies of the Clansmen and bury the dead of Elden. The peace of Elden was returning and all would soon be as it once was. All save the Thunder Stone, which still glowed with moonfire reflected in the countless gem-like facets.

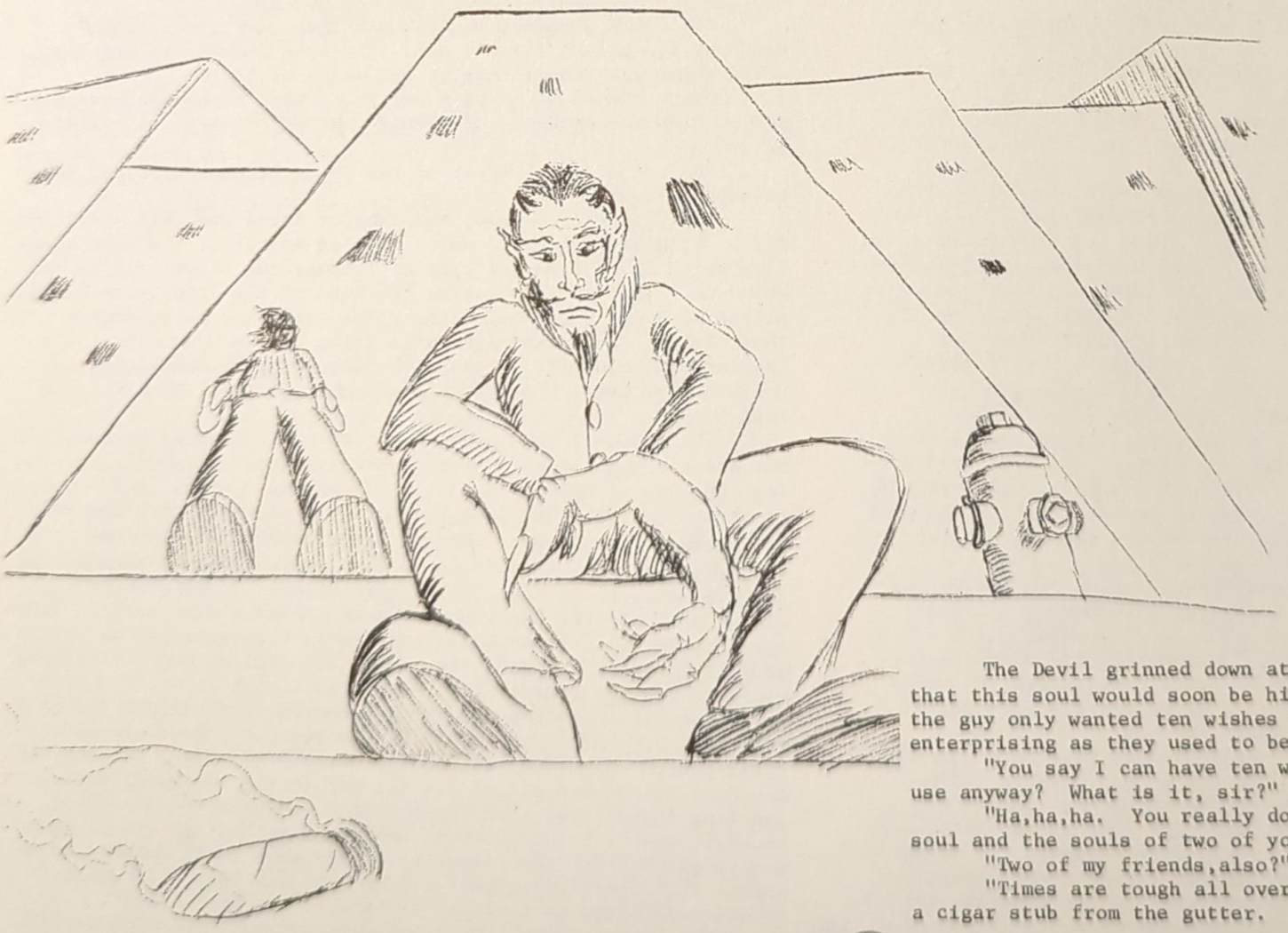
Soon only the two Brothers of the Fire and the Lore-Master of Elden remained on the ramparts of the South Wall. Silently, they waited until the new dawn rose up from the east, bringing with it the scouraging light of day to banish the lingering shadows of fear. Then the three descended to the gate, where three fresh ebony steeds awaited them. Upon one animal was tied the broken body of Moonbane, no longer possessed. The hollow pits of his eyes stared sightlessly into the earth.

The Lore-Master turned to his friends as they mounted and spoke his thanks: "Brothers, you have gone through much this past night. I grieve with you for the loss of Moonbane, though I know his spirit will find peace and freedom in the hall of lords. I know that the powers that have possessed you have taxed your bodies and spirits. Would that I could lighten the burdens which rest so heavily on your shoulders."

Touchstone smiled a weary smile as he wrapped his cape closer around his shivering body. "It is no burden to serve or die for the Elemental Lords. It is joy: the joy of being eternally at one with the winds, the seas, and the earth, even unto death. Fare you well, Lore-Master, and have no fear of the Clans of the Cloven Hoof. So long as the Thunder Stone shines bright and clear, they shall never set foot across the Lainrod River."

"Fare you well, Touchstone and Silverwraith," whispered the Lore-Master.

The two Brothers nodded and slowly rode their horses through the South Gate of Elden, where the Thunder Stone glowed, and past the twin print marks of the Cloven Hoof, grim reminders of what had passed that night. Silverwraith led the horse which carried Moonbane's body while Touchstone guided them to the Elden road. They turned north, towards the Mount of Starkhorn, and soon disappeared from sight.



HARD TIMES

written and illustrated
by Ford Curry.

The Devil grinned down at the young man. He felt sure that this soul would soon be his. What made it funny was that the guy only wanted ten wishes for it. Well, they aren't as enterprising as they used to be.

"You say I can have ten wishes for something I don't use anyway? What is it, sir?" the stripling asked naively.

"Ha,ha,ha. You really don't know? Well, son, its your soul and the souls of two of your friends."

"Two of my friends,also?" the lad asked quizzically.

"Times are tough all over," said the Devil, picking up a cigar stub from the gutter.

IT BEGINS HERE, ON A BARREN PLATEAU UPON THE PLANET KNOWN AS "DEATHWORLD"...

YOUR MASTER NEVER CEASES TO AMAZE ME, HE KNOWS I CAN DEFEAT AN ARMY LIKE YOU, HE PLACES LITTLE VALUE ON YOUR LIFE FOOL!

I AM NOT A MERE SOLDIER, I AM SABER THE SLAYER OF DEMONS, AND YOU SHALL DIE BY MY BLADE!!

HE IS CALLED THE STAR-STREAKER BY MOST MEN, BY OTHERS HE IS CALLED "FREEDOM MAN" FOR REASONS TO BECOME OBVIOUS VERY SOON...

ALL WHO SERVE DEATHLORD ARE SCUM, LOWER THAN RATS!! AND MUST BE TREATED AS SUCH...

WOK!

HE DOES NOT SEE THE SHIP UNTIL IT IS TOO LATE....

STAR-STREAKER! STAY WHERE YOU ARE, AND NO HARM SHALL BEFALL YOU!!

IF I REMAIN I SHALL BE KILLED! I MUST MOVE AND QUICKLY!!!

INTRODUCING: THE MAN CALLED-

STAR-STREAKER

- PROLOGUE -

CREATED, WRITTEN & PENCILLED by FRANK ALARCON
INKS by JUAN-FRANCISCO

THERE IS NO ESCAPE WHELP!! SURRENDER NOW AND LIVE!!!

FIRE LASERS!! WHATEVER THEY TOUCH TURNS INTO ASHES, AS DOES SABER THE SLAYER... KILLED BY HIS OWN MASTER!!

AHHHHHH!! HELP ME! HELP ME! THE PAIN, PAIN!

ALL CHARACTERS ©1975 FRANK ALARCON

I HAVE ESCAPED BEFORE, I SHALL AGAIN, AND AGAIN, TILL I'VE COMPLETED MY MISSION!

WOOOSH

WOOOSH

ABOARD THE WAR-SHIP!!

HA! HE RUNS LIKE THE FOOL HE IS, A COWARD IN A MANS GUISE....

HE HAS HINDERED ME FOR TO LONG!! YET I ENJOY THESE HUNTS, THEY PROVIDE MUCH AMUSEMENT...

WHEN I FEEL READY I SHALL CRUSH HIM LIKE THE INSECT HE TRULY IS, BUT FOR NOW LET HIM SUFFER FOR HE KNOWS HE CANNOT DEFEAT DEATHLORD!!

PILOT, I HAVE HAD ENOUGH, HEAD BACK TO THE PALACE...

DONE!!!

HEAR ME DEATHLORD!! YOU SHALL BE CONQUERED, TOO LONG HAVE YOU RULED, MY PEOPLE HAVE SUFFERED TO MUCH! BY THE "OLD ONE" I'LL RUN YOU THREW, SO I SWEAR!!

AND THEY SAY THERE WAS LAUGHTER FROM THE PALACE ROYAL THIS DAY...

THIS WAS JUST A TEMPTER, IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE ENTIRE SAGA OF STAR-STREAKER, WRITE TO THIS MAG OR TO FRANK ALARCON, 35 CENTRE ST. NUTLEY N.J. 07110 THANK YOU.

STAR-STREAKER

"IN A UNIVERSE TORN APART BY HATE, HE IS THE SHINING STAR ABOVE THE BLAZING HELL...

DEATHLORD

"WHEN A SURVEY OF VILLIANS IS TAKEN, HE WILL RANK AS THE ULTIMATE EVIL.. HIS PLAN — TOTAL RULE OF ALL WORLDS.... CONTROLLED BY HIS MASSIVE WAR MACHINE..

THE OLD ONE

"STAR-STREAKER OR" DEATHLORD, WHICH DOES HE SERVE?... NO ONE KNOWS OR DARES ASK.....

PRESENTING — AN EPIC OF GIANT PROPORTIONS.... UNLIKE ANY-THING EVER SEEN IN COMICS, OR ANYWHERE ELSE... BE HERE FOR THE BEGINNING OF THIS FANTASTIC SAGA... COMING SOON IN —

STARZY

CREATED, WRITTEN DRAWN BY FRANK ACHARCON .TH.

GIT THAT VARMINT!
HOT DAMN
YAHOO!
Wallace 74